THE NEST

ANNE DOUGLAS SEDGWICK

REFERENCE LIBRARY * HOUGHTON MIFFLIN CO. * BOSTON, MASS.
Archive
Collection

This book may not leave the Office
and if borrowed must be returned within 7 days

THE NEST

THE NEST

and Other Stories

BY

ANNE DOUGLAS SEDGWICK

(MRS. BASIL DE SÉLINCOURT)

AUTHOR OF "THE LITTLE FRENCH GIRL," "TANTE," "FRANKLIN WINSLOW KANE," ETC.

BOSTON AND NEW YORK

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

The Riverside Press Cambridge

1926

COPYRIGHT, 1898, BY CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
COPYRIGHT, 1902, 1904, AND 1912, BY THE CENTURY COMPANY
COPYRIGHT, 1913, BY HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

The Riverside Press
CAMBRIDGE · MASSACHUSETTS
PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

PREFACE

It seemed suitable, when making a selection of short stories for publication in book form, to include my first attempt with my last, and therefore the very juvenile production—"Miss Jones and the Masterpiece"—finds a place with the others.

My thanks are due to the Editors of the *Century Magazine, Scribners' Magazine,* and the *English Review,* for allowing me to republish the stories that appeared in their pages.

November, 1912.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
THE NEST	3
THE WHITE PAGODA	79
THE SUICIDE	141
A FORSAKEN TEMPLE	181
MISS JONES AND THE MASTERPIECE	267

THE NEST

THE NEST

CHAPTER I

HE seemed to have had no time for thinking before he sank into a corner of the railway carriage and noted, with a satisfaction under the circumstances perhaps trivial, that he would have it to himself for the swift hour down to the country. Satisfactions of any sort seemed inappropriate, an appanage that he should have left behind him for ever on stepping from the great specialist's door in Wimpole Street two hours ago. When a man has but a month—at most two months—to live, small hopes and fears should drop from him: he should be stripped, as it were, for the last solitary wrestle in the arena of death.

But the drive, from the doctor's to the city and from there to Paddington, had seemed unusually full of life's solicitations. The soft, strained eyes of an over-laden horse, appealing in patience from the shade of dusty blinkers; the dismal degradation of a music-hall poster —a funny man with reddened nose and drunken

hat, as appealing in his slavery as the horse; the vaporous blue-green silhouettes of the Park on a silvery sky;—he had found himself responding to these with pity, repugnance and pleasure as normally as if they meant for him now what they always would have meant. That such impressions were so soon to cease must change all their meaning,—at least, so one would have supposed; he began to think of that and to wonder a little over the apparent stoicism of those intervening hours; but, while the mood had lasted, the fact that he had come to the end of things, that there was a pit dug across his path, had done hardly more than skim on the outskirts of his alert yet calm receptivity. He seemed never to have noticed more, never to have been more conscious of the outer world and so little conscious of himself.

Now, in the train, the outer world, wraith-like in a sudden summer shower, became the background as it sped on either side, and thoughts were in the foreground, thoughts of himself as doomed, and of the life that he had loved and worked in, as measured into one shallow cupful at his lips. Even yet it was almost absurd, the difficulty he found in realising it. The doomed figure detached itself, became that of a piteous, a curious alien, whom

one watched respectfully and from a distance. From a safe shore he observed the tossing of the rapidly sinking skiff with its helpless occupant. It required a great pull, push, and effort of his whole being, like that of awakening from a half-dream, in order to see, in order to say to himself, really believing it, that he was the man. Wonder, rather than dread or sorrow, was still the paramount feeling, though, oppressively, as if he picked his steps about the verge of an echoing cavern, turning away his eyes, there lurked behind all that he felt the sense of sudden emptiness and dark.

It was wonderful, immensely absorbing and interesting, this idea of being himself doomed. Self-conscious, observant, sensitive as he was, he still thought more than felt. It was at last credible and indubitable that he *was* the man, and he was asking himself how he would take it; he was asking himself how he would bear it. He was amused to observe that the pathetic old human vanity, by no means stunned, was pushing its head above the tossing surface in order to assure him again and again that he would bear it very well. It should be a graceful and gallant exit. If there were to be dark moments, moments when the cavern sucked him in and had him, if he was

to know horror and despair, no one else, at all events, should know that he knew them; no one else should share his suffering. Up to the edge of extinction he would keep silence and a stoic cheerfulness. The doctor had promised him that there would be little pain; there would be knowledge only to conceal.

This vanity, and there was satisfaction in it for all his ironic insight, was not so selfish as it seemed; the next turn of thought led him to this. For no one had a right to share his suffering; or perhaps it would be more magnanimous to say that the some one of whom he was thinking had a right to be spared the sharing of it. He shared so few of the things that mattered with Kitty that she might well claim immunity. His wife's figure, since the very beginning, had been hovering near his thoughts, not once looked at directly. It might be horribly painful to look at it, but he suspected that it would not be so painful as to look at the other near thing that he must leave behind: his work; the work that with all its grind and routine—so hard to harness to at first—had now become so much a part of himself. The fact that he might come nearer to despair, nearer to the crumbling edge of the cavern, when he thought of leaving his work than when

he thought of leaving his wife, was in itself a pain; but it was an old pain in a new guise. Kitty had for so long been one of the things that counted for less than his work. Vanity even raised its voice high enough to say ruefully that they might get on badly without him at the Home Office; the country itself might suffer. He smiled; but the dart told; it was perhaps feathered with truth. Yes, everything most essential in him, everything that most counted, was answered, called forth in his work. It was in that that he would most truly die. For, of course, in the many other, the young, the ardent, the foolish hopes, he was dead already. And it was round the figure of his wife, that light and radiant figure, sweet, soft, appealing, that those dead hopes seemed to gather, like mist about a flower.

Poor, lovely little Kitty: the sight of the rain-dimmed meadow-sweet, by the brookside in a passing field, brought her before him in this aspect of innocent disillusioner. For nothing essential, nothing that counted in him, was answered or called forth by Kitty except a slightly ironic tenderness. He didn't judge life from his own failure to find splendid mutual enterprise and sacred mutual comprehension where his lover's blindness had thought

to find it. Nor did he judge Kitty. His own blindness was the fault, if fault there were, and even that blindness he could now see tolerantly. The dart and pang had gone from his memory of young love; his smile for it was indulgent; he was even glad that the memory was there, glad that he had known the illusion, even if it were at the price of failure in that happy realm of life. Little of the sadness could have been Kitty's; she had not known the bitterness of his slow awakening; she was easily contented with the tame terms of unillumined life. A charming home; a fond husband; a pretty, diligent part to play in the political and social life of the countryside; the nicest taste to show in dress and friends;—Kitty, he imagined, thought of her life as completely successful. And why not? He himself saw love as an episode and contentedly accepted the fact that for the flower-like woman and the man who works there can be, eventually, no deeper bond.

He knew two or three other women who interested him more than Kitty ever could; to them he went when he wanted to talk about anything he cared for. Kitty was sweet to see; she made him very comfortable; she rarely irritated him. With friends and Kitty what

did he want of women more? Outside these domestic and drawing-room circles was the world of men and ideas in which he lived, in which his real life had its roots.

Yet, as the train neared the little country station, as familiar lanes and meadows glided slowly past the windows, he became aware that his thoughts had more and more slid from this outside life, this world of work and reality, and that from thinking of the little part that Kitty played in it he had come to thinking of Kitty and to the thought that he was to see her for the last time.—Yes; that crashed in at last. At last something seemed to come to him which, in the pain of it, was completely adequate to the situation. It was the Kitty of six years ago that he saw most clearly, the girl he had fallen in love with, his bride; but there were all the other memories too, the little silent memories, the nothings, the everythings of daily life together; small joys, small sorrows. The breakfast-table, Kitty behind the coffee, reading aloud to him some scrap of her morning budget; the garden, Kitty showing him how a new flower was thriving; Kitty riding beside him in the dew to an early meet; and, suddenly, among all the trivial memories, the solemn one that hardly seemed to go with Kitty at all,—

Kitty's face looking up at him, disfigured with grief and pain, as he told her that their child—it had died at birth—was dead.

The other women, the interesting ones, the women who, more or less, knew their way about his mind and soul, were forgotten, blotted out completely by the trivial and the solemn memories. He felt no desire to see them, no desire at all to say good-bye to them; that would be to bring them near. But he did want to see Kitty, at once. She was not near mind or soul; but she was near as life is near; near like the pulse of his heart; and, with all the other things, he felt, suddenly, that Kitty was his child, too, and that paternal yearning was mingled with the crying out of his whole nature towards her. For it was crying out; and, if she was his child, in what deep strange sense was he not her child, too.

The wide world, the real world, the outside world of work and achievement, collapsed like a crumpled panorama; he was covering his eyes; he was shuddering; he was stumbling back to the nest, wounded to death, there to fold himself in darkness, in oblivion, in love.—How near we are to the animal, he thought, smiling, with trembling lips, as he saw the station slide outside the windows at last, saw the face of the

station-master—he had never before known that the station-master was such a lovable person—he seemed so near the nest that he must be lovable—saw, beyond the flower-wreathed palings, the dog-cart waiting for him. But his deeper self rebuked the cynical side-glance. The trembling smile, he knew, had more of truth:—how near we are to the divine. The pain and ecstasy of this moment of arrival made it one of the most vivid and significant of his life. Almost worth while to know that one is to die in a month if the knowledge brings with it such flashes of beauty of vision. The whole earth seemed transfigured and heavenly.

Dean, the coachman, gave acquiescent answers to his questions on the homeward drive. He heard the sound of his own voice and knew that he was speaking as he wanted to be sure of speaking for these next weeks, with ease and lightness. He would be able to keep up before Kitty. Until the very end she should be spared everything; there was joy in the thought, and no longer any vanity. He would see her, be with her, and she should not know. He would see her happy for their last month together. He clasped the thought of her happiness—with her—to his heart.

Like all ecstasies, it faded, this rapture of his

return. By the time the house was reached, the lovely little Jacobean house that they had found together, the buoyancy was gone and what was left was a sweetness and a great fatigue. He was to see her; that was well; and here was the nest; that was well, too. But he wanted to fold his wings and sleep.

Mrs. Holland was not in the house, the butler told him, she and Sir Walter had gone down to the river together. Holland felt that he would rather not go after them. He would wait so that he should see Kitty alone when he first saw her. He liked Sir Walter, their friend and neighbour; it would not be difficult to act before him, and he knew that he could begin acting at once; but, for this first meeting of the new, short epoch, he must see Kitty alone. So he had his tea in the library—queer to go on having tea, queer to find one still liked tea—and looked over some papers, and saw, outside, the afternoon grow stiller and more golden, and knew that all dreads were in abeyance and that the somnolence, as of a drugged sweetness and fatigue, still kept him safe.

He was conscious at last of a purely physical chill; the library was cool and he stepped into the sunlight on the lawn, walking up and down among the flowers and, presently, across the

grassy terraces, to the lower groups of trees, vaguely directing his steps to the little summer-house that faced the west and was as full of sunlight at this hour as a fretted shell of warm, lapping sea-water. They could not see him, on their way up from the river, nor he them, from here, and after a half-hour or so of dreamy basking it would be time to dress for dinner, Sir Walter would have gone and Kitty would be at the house again.

He followed the narrow path, set thickly with young ashes and sycamores, and saw beyond the trees the roof of the summer-house heaped with illumined festoons of traveller's-joy, and then, when he was near, he heard voices within it, Kitty's voice and Sir Walter's.

Hesitating, half-turning to go back, it was as if a childish panic of shyness seized him, so that he smiled at himself as he stood there, in the arrested attitude of an involuntary eavesdropper. But the smile faded. A look of bewilderment came to his face. Kitty was weeping and Sir Walter was pleading with her, and so strange was Sir Walter's voice, so strange what he was saying to Kitty, that all the strangeness of the day found now its culminating moment.

He walked on, slowly, unwillingly, helplessly,

walked on, as he now knew, into some far other form of suffering than any that had been foreseen by him that afternoon.

A rustic seat ran round the summer-house. On the side most hidden he sank down. He did not choose the hidden side. He had no feeling of will or choice; had they come out upon him he would have looked at them with the same bewildered eyes. But, dully, he felt that he must know,—know,—why Kitty was unhappy.

Sunken on the seat, among the traveller's-joy, exhausted, yet alert, his head dizzy and his heart stilled, as it were, to listen, it was this amazement and curiosity that Holland felt rather than anger, jealousy, or grief.

Kitty was unhappy; Sir Walter loved her, and she loved Sir Walter. Sir Walter was imploring her to come away with him. "But you do love me," was the phrase that he repeated again and again, the strong protest of fact against her refusal.

The dizziness lifting, the heart beating more normally, Holland knew more. Kitty was unhappy and loved Sir Walter, but, deeper than that, was the truth that she was happy in her knowledge of his love, deeper than that—though this depth was of thankfulness in her

husband's heart—was the truth that the love was as yet a beautiful pastime; there was joy for her in her own sadness, drama in her pain; she was a child with a strange toy in her hand; it charmed her and she had not learned to dread it.

Her husband's comprehension of her, of her childishness, her fluidity, her weakness, actually touched with respect his comprehension of Sir Walter; for Sir Walter's strength was reverent, even in his recklessness there was dignity. Holland knew that he spoke the truth when he said to Kitty that she might trust him for life.

It was the real thing with Sir Walter. With Kitty the real thing could be little more than the response to reality in others. There was the danger that her husband steadied himself to look at, as he sat in the sunlight outside the summer-house and listened.

The dizziness was quite gone. He had never felt a greater mental clarity. He knew that he must be suffering; but suffering seemed relegated to some region of mere physical sensation. He saw and understood so many things that he had never seen or understood before. He felt no jealousy, not a pang of the defrauded, injured male, not a throb of the broken-hearted lover; yet it was not indiffer-

ence to Kitty that gave him his immunity; he had never cared more for Kitty; it was, perhaps, in a tenderer key, as he cared for the station-master, as he cared, now, for Sir Walter. He was himself soon to die and, as personalities, as related to his own life, people had ceased to count; but as lives that were to go on after he was dead, they counted as they had never done till then; and Kitty most of all. It was this intense consciousness of her youth, of all the years of life she had to live, that pressed with such clearness and such fear upon him. She had all her life before her and she held in her hands a terrible, a beautiful toy that, suddenly transformed to an engine of destruction, might shatter her.

Sir Walter was going. He said that he would come again to-morrow.

"Nicholas will be here," said Kitty. She no longer wept. Her voice, now that the stress of the situation was over, had regained its pensive sweetness.

"Yes," said Sir Walter, "that's what's so odious, darling; he will always be here and everything will be twisted and horrible. I like your husband."

"He is a strange man; I sometimes think that he cares for nothing but his work; he is all

thought and no heart. I don't believe that he would really mind if I were to go away with you. He would smile, sadly and ironically, and say: 'Poor, silly child.' And then he would turn to his papers. I'm nothing to him but a doll, a convenient, domestic doll. And he doesn't care for playing with dolls except for a little while now and then." Kitty spoke with a sober pathos that did not veil resentment.

"Ah, you can say all that to me—and expect me to go on bearing seeing you wasted and thrown away!" Sir Walter broke out. "What stands between us? Why must we go on suffering like this?"

"Isn't it a great joy—to know that the other is there, understanding—and caring?"

"A killing sort of joy."

"How cruel, how wrong you are," Kitty murmured; but her husband knew that for her, indeed, the joy was deep, and that it was in such moments of power over an emotion she could rouse yet dominate that she had her keenest sense of it.

"I can't help it," said Sir Walter. "I shall always want you to come away with me."

"Good-bye:—for to-day."

"It's you who are cruel."

At that, silence following, Holland knew that Kitty's quiet tears fell again.

Sir Walter was subjugated. He pleaded for pardon; promised not to torment her—to try not to torment her. A trysting-place was fixed on for next day and Holland felt another chill of fear at Kitty's swift resource and craft in planning it. The child knew how to plot and lie. It thought itself nobly justified, no doubt, and that its fidelity to duty gave it the right to every liberty of conscience. And before Sir Walter went there was a moment of relenting that showed how near was the joy of yielding to the joy of ruthlessness. "For this once,—for this once only—" Kitty murmured. And Holland knew that Sir Walter held her in his arms and kissed her.

After his departure Kitty sat on for some moments in the summer-house. She sighed deeply once or twice and Holland fancied, from her light movements, that she had leaned her arms on the table and rested her head on them. He heard presently, that she was softly saying a prayer, and at the sound, tears filled his eyes. Then, rising, she collected her basket of flowers, her parasol, her books, and walked away with slow steps along the path leading to the house.

CHAPTER II

TWO facts stood clear before Holland's eyes. He had been culpably blind and Kitty was in danger. He asked himself if he had not been culpably selfish too, for Kitty's summing up of his attitude towards her would have hurt had he not been beyond such hurts; but, looking back, he could not see that he had ever pushed Kitty aside nor relegated her to the place of plaything. No; the ship of his romance, all its sails set to fairest, sweetest hopes, had been well-ballasted by the most serious, most generous of modern theories as to the right relations of man and wife. And the shock and disillusion had been to find, day by day, that it was, so to speak, only the sails that Kitty cared for. The cargo, the purpose of their voyage, left her prettily, vaguely indifferent. Again and again, he remembered, it had been as if he had led her down into the busy heart of the ship, explained the chart to her, pointed out all the interesting wares. Kitty had shown a graceful interest, but with the

manner of a lovely voyager, brought down from sunny or starlit contemplations on deck to humour the dry tastes of the captain. She didn't care a bit for the cargo, or the purposes; she didn't care a bit for any of his interests nor wish to share them; his interests, in so far as specialized and unrelated to their romance, were, she intimated, by every retreating grace —as of gathered-up skirts and a backward smile for the captain in his prosy room—the captain's own particular manly business; her business was to be womanly, that is, to be charming, to feel the breeze in the sails, and to gaze at the stars. And though, now for the first time he saw it, Kitty was not the happy, facilely contented woman he had thought her, it was really as if the ship, with weightier cargoes to carry, more distant ports to reach, had undergone a transformation; throbbing and complicated machinery moved instead of sails, and on its workaday decks Kitty strolled wistfully, missing the sails, missing the romance, but missing only that.

He had accepted, helplessly, her interpretation of their specialised existences, hoping only that hers might assume the significance that would, perhaps, justify the old-fashioned separation of interests; but no children came

after the first, the child that died at birth, the child that his heart ached over still; and he could not believe that Kitty felt the lack, could hardly believe that she shared his hope for other children. She had suffered terribly in the birth of the one, more, perhaps, than in its death—though that had temporarily crushed her—and she had been horribly frightened by the cruelties and perils of maternity. So, though he had come to think of her as essentially womanly, it was in a rather narrow sense; the term had by degrees lost many, even, of its warm, instinctive associations, and as he now sat thinking, near the summer-house, it took on its narrowest, if most piteous meaning. Kitty was essentially womanly. She needed some one to be in love with her. Her husband had ceased to be in love—though he had not ceased to be a loving husband—and she responded helplessly to a lover's appeal. Sir Walter's appeal was very persuasive. A ship of snowy, wing-like sails, a fairy ship, rocked on the waves at the very edge of Kitty's sheltered life. Only a shutting of the eyes, a holding of the breath, and she would be carried across the narrow intervening depth to the deck, to freedom, to safety—she would believe —to sails trimmed for an immortal romance.

Would Kitty's cowardice, and Kitty's prayers —they were interwoven he felt sure—keep her for one month from running away with Sir Walter? In only a month's time she could respond and not be shattered: in only a month's time the ship of romance would be really safe, she might walk on board with no shutting of the eyes or holding of the breath. Holland gazed, and the facts became clearer and more ominous. For the lack of a knowledge that was his, Kitty and Sir Walter might wreck their lives. All the motives for the concealment of his secret, the vanity, the bravery, the cherishing tenderness that had inspired him, were scattered to the winds. The nest was a tattered, wind-pierced ruin. And he, already, was a ghost. Kitty should not lack the knowledge.

The dew was falling, and he had grown chilly. He walked back quickly to the house that he had left a little while ago so vividly aware of the sweetness that the shallow cup might hold. The cup was empty. Not a drop of self was left to hope or live for.

. . . . . .

He waited till the next day to tell her. He did not feel a tremor, he felt too deep a fatigue.

Their meeting at dinner was a placid gliding over the depths; two hooded gondolas floating

side by side, each with its shrouded secret. But skill and vigilance were his. Kitty's gondola drifted with the current, knowing no need of skill, secure of secrecy. The eyes she quietly lifted to her husband were unclouded. He guessed the inner drama that held her thoughts, the tragically beautiful *role* that she herself played in it. It was as a heroine that she saw herself. Why not, indeed. No heroine could have played her part more gracefully and worthily, and a heroine's innocent eyes could not be expected to see as far as his "ironic" ones.

It was the sense of distance, from her, from everything, that grew upon him during the long intervals of the night when he lay awake and watched the stars slowly cross his open window. He was no longer divided from himself, no longer groping, as in the train, to find a clue between the doomed man and the watcher. The self that he had found was adrift upon a sea, solitary indeed, and saw pigmy figures moving in the shifting lights and shadows of the shore. His mild pre-occupation was with one figure, light, fluttering, foolish: she was walking near the verge of the cliff and her foothold might give way. He intended to signal to her and to point out a safe

road through the cornfields, before he turned himself again to loneliness, the sky, and the sea that was soon to engulf him.

. . . . . .

This self-obliterating immensity of mood was contracted and ruffled next morning by the trivial difficulties that stood in the way of his determination. He went to Kitty's boudoir—and, in spite of immensities, he knew that his heart beat heavily under the burden of its project, how careful he must be, how delicate—to find her interviewing the cook. In the garden, she was talking to the gardener, and afterwards, in her room, she was trying on a tea-gown before the mirror. Actually he felt some irritation.

"When can I see you, Kitty?" he asked.

Her eyes in the glass met his with surprise at his tone; but surprise was all. "See me? Here I am. What is it?—No, Cécile, the sash must knot, so; tie it more to the side."

"I want to talk over something with you."

"I'm rather busy this morning. Will after lunch do? Don't you see, Cécile, like this."

"No, it won't. I must see you now," said Holland, almost querulously.

She turned her head to look at him and a

shadow crossed her face. Suddenly, he saw it, she was a little frightened.

"Of course, directly. I'll come to the library."

Seeing that fear, and smitten with compunction, a rather silly impulse made him smile at her and say:—"Don't bother to hurry. I can wait." But he did want her to hurry. He felt that he could wait no longer.

He walked up and down the library. The weariness of the day before was gone; the sweetness, of course, was gone, and the inhuman immensity was gone too. He felt oddly normal and reasonable, detached yet implicated; almost like a friendly family doctor come to break the fatal news to the ignorant wife. It was just the anxiety that the doctor might feel, the grave trouble and the twinge of awkwardness.

He had only waited for ten minutes when Kitty appeared in the doorway.

Kitty Holland was still a young woman and looked younger than her years. The roundness and blueness and steady gaze of her eyes, the bloom of her cheeks and innocent lustre of her golden hair gave an infantile quality to her loveliness. She was not a vain woman, but she was conscious of these advantages and the

consciousness had touched the child-like candour and confidingness with a little artificiality, for long apparent to her husband's kindly but dispassionate eye. To other people Mrs. Holland's manner, the whispering vagueness of her voice, the wistful dwelling of her glance, was felt to be artificial only as the gold embroideries and serrated edges on the robes of a Fra Angelico angel are felt as something added and decorative. Kitty was far too intelligent to try to look like a Fra Angelico angel; she was picturesque as only the extremely fashionable can be picturesque; but Holland knew she was conscious that she reminded people of an angel, and of a child, and that she reminded herself continually of all sorts of exquisite things, partly because she was dreamily self-conscious and keenly aware of exquisiteness, and partly because he had, in their first year, the year of sails and breezes, so impressed these things upon her attention.

He himself had grown accustomed to—perhaps a little tired of—the lily poise of the head, the long, gentle hands, the floating step, quite the step of an angel aware of flower-dappled grass beneath its feet and the flutter of embroidered draperies. But Kitty, though accustomed to these graces, in herself, had not

grown tired of them, they had, indeed, more and more filled the foreground of her delicate and decorative life, so that he could guess at how much his own indifference had helped to alienate her.

And now, as he turned to look at her, these half ironic, half affectionate impressions hovered as a background, and, sharply drawn upon it, with the biting acid of his new perceptions, he saw something else in Kitty's face that he had never seen before.

Already he had seen her as a womanly woman, as that in its narrowest sense. He saw her now as a type of the woman who live in and through and for their affections, and this with their sensations rather than with their intelligences. Vividly his memory struck them out;—the faces of the satisfied women, taking on, as years pass over them, as experience detaches from the craving, sentimental self, and frees the instincts to push, climb, cling in roots and tendrils for other selves, a vegetable serenity and simplicity;—and, more vividly, with discomfort in the memory, the faces of the unsatisfied; the womanly married woman whose romance is over, the spinster who has missed romance; faces chiselled to subtlety by dreams and frustration.

On Kitty's face he saw it now, that look of a subtlety childlike, innocent, of flesh rather than of spirit, yet, in its very unconsciousness, almost sinister. For a moment, as the lines of the sharp new perception etched themselves, lines gossamer-like in fineness, floating, transforming shadows rather than lines, he was afraid of his wife, afraid of the alien, mysterious force he guessed in her.

For the delicately sinister subtlety was remote from his understanding, was a subtlety that no man's face can show, capable as it is of a grossness and corruption merely animal by contrast; open and obvious. Kitty's subtlety did not make her animal: it made her more than ever like an angel; but an ambiguous angel; and to feel that he did not understand her made her strange. It was no clue to feel that she did not understand herself; it was only a further depth of mystery.

He was ashamed of his own folly in another moment, ashamed of an insight distorted and distorting, so he told himself. Over and above all such morbidities was the fact that Kitty was looking at him with the eyes of a frightened child—a real child.

The reaction from his fear, the recognition of her fear, stirred in him a love more personal

than any of the vast benevolences that he had felt. He went to her and led her to the window-seat where, sitting down himself, holding both her hands in his and looking up at her standing before him, he said with the quiet of long-prepared words: "Kitty, dear, I have something that I want to tell you and that will make you, I think, a little sad. We have had happy times together, haven't we? It isn't all regret. You and I are going to part, Kitty."

She gazed at him and terror widened her eyes. She could not speak. She did not move. Her hands in his hands seemed dead.

He saw in a moment what the fear was that showed itself in this torpor of apprehension, and he hastened on so that she should not, in her dread, reveal the secret that need never be spoken.

"I'm going to die, Kitty," he said, "I had my sentence yesterday, from Dr. Farebrother. I never dreamed that it was anything serious, that complaint of mine, you know,—never dreamed it even when it began to trouble me a good deal, as it has of late. But it's not what I thought. It's fatal; and it will gallop now. He gives me one month—at the very most, two months." He spoke deliberately, though swiftly, and, as he finished, he smiled

up at her, a reassuring smile. His wife's dilated eyes, fixed on him, made him flush a little in the ensuing pause. He felt that the smile had been inept. He had spoken too much from the height of his detachment, and the placidity of his words might well seem horrible to her.

She was finding it horrible. She seemed to be breathing the icy air of a vault that he had opened before her; heavy, slow, painful breaths, those of a sleeper oppressed by nightmare; the sound of them, the sight of her labouring breast hurt him. He put his arms around her and smiled now, as one smiles at a child to console it. "I've frightened you," he said; "forgive me. You see, one gets used to it, so soon, for oneself. Dear little Kitty, I'm so sorry."

Still she did not speak. Still it was that torpid terror that gazed at him. And the terror was not for what he had thought it was; it was for what he had said. It was a contagious terror. She cared. In some unexplained, unforeseen way she cared terribly; and his projects crumbled beneath her gaze; bewilderment drifted in his mind; her fear gained him.

"What is the matter? What is it?" he asked.

The change and sharpness in his voice

brought them near at last. Kitty seized his hands and lifted them from her; yet grasping, clinging as she held him off. He would not have thought her face capable of such fierceness and demand. She was hardly recognisable as she said: "Do you want to die? Don't you mind dying?"

"Mind?—I should rather not, of course. I care for my life. But one must face it; what else is there to do?—And,—what is it Kitty? What have I done to you?"

And now, her head fallen back, her eyes closed, tears ran down her face, as piteously, agonised and stricken, she asked:

"Don't you love me at all? Don't you mind leaving me at all?"

His astonishment was so great that for a moment it bereft him of words. He had risen and was holding her; her eyes were closed and she sobbed and sobbed, her head fallen back. And her passion of sorrow and despair, her loveliness, too, and youth, seized and shook him; so that all the things he had not felt yet, all the hovering, dreadful things, the dark forms of the cavern, encompassed, pressed upon him; despair and longing, the horror of annihilation, the agonising sweetness of life. It was as if a hidden wound had been opened and that

his blood was gushing forth, not to peace, but to pain and torment. He felt his own sobs rising; she cared; how much she cared. It was as if her caring gave him back the self that yesterday had blotted out; in her pain he knew his own; in her self he saw and mourned his own doomed and piteous self. His head leaned to hers and his lips sought hers, when, suddenly, a furious memory came, and indignation suffocated him.

He thrust her violently away, holding her by the shoulders. "How dare you! how dare you!" he cried. "You don't love me. You don't mind my dying. How dare you torture me like this—when it's not real,—when I was at peace."

It was like a wild, impossible dream. Their faces stared at each other; their hands seized each other; they spoke, their voices clashing, and shaken by strangling sobs.

"How dare you say that to me! You have broken my heart! You haven't cared for years —for years!" Kitty cried. "I've longed—longed. It is too horrible. How dare you come and tell me that you are going to die and that it will make me a little sad. Oh! I love you—and you are horrible to me."

"You are lying, Kitty—you are lying!"

"That too! You can say that! To me! To me!"

"It's true. You know you lie. I haven't loved you as I did. But I've cared—good God! I see now how much.—It is you who have ceased to care."

At these words Kitty was transfigured. Joy, joy unmistakable, flamed up in her. It mounted to her eyes and lips, revivifying her ravaged face, beaming forth, inundating him, unfaltering, assured, absolute. "Darling—darling—you love me? you do love me?—Oh, you shan't die—I won't let you die. My love will keep you with me. We will forget all these years when we haven't understood—when we've forgotten. We will forget everything—except that we love each other and that that is all there is to live for in the world."

"And—Sir Walter?—" he said, simply and helplessly.

Kitty's arms were about his neck, her transfigured face was upturned to him. Worshipped by those eyes, held in that embrace, his words, in his own ears, were absurd. Yet he hadn't been dreaming yesterday. Kitty might make the words seem absurd; but even Kitty's eyes and Kitty's arms could not conjure away the facts of the sunlit summer-house, the tears,

the parting kiss. What of Sir Walter? What else was there left to say?

But after he had said them, and stood looking at her, it was as if his words released the last depths of her rapture. She did not flush or falter or show, even, any shock or surprise. Her arms about him, her eyes on his, it was a stiller, a more solemn joy that dwelt on him and enfolded him.

"You know?" she said.

"I heard you last evening," Holland answered. "I was sitting outside the summer-house. You said you loved him. You let him kiss you."

"You will forgive me," said Kitty. They were looking at each other like two children. "I thought I loved him, because I was so unhappy, and he is so dear and kind and loves me so much. I must love some one. I must be loved. I was so lonely. And you seemed not to care at all any more. You were only my husband, you weren't my lover.—And you don't know all. He doesn't know it. But I know it now. And I must tell you everything —all the dreadful weakness—you must understand it all. Perhaps, if this hadn't come, perhaps, if you hadn't been given back to me like this, I might have gone away with him, Nich-

olas. It wasn't that I had ceased to love you; it was that I had to be loved and was weak before love. It is dreadful;—I believe all women are like that. And I did struggle, oh, I did. Nicholas, you will forgive me?"

"I knew it, dear, and I forgave you."

"You knew it? You loved me so much that you forgave?"

"That was why I told you, Kitty. I hadn't meant to tell you; I had meant to keep it from you, this sadness, and to make our last month together a happy one for you. I was coming back to you with such longing, dear. And then I heard; and then I was afraid that you might go away before you would be free."

"You loved me so much? You did it because you loved me so much?—Oh! Nicholas —Nicholas!"

"That was why I said those horrible things. I wanted you to be happy. I didn't think you could be more than a little sad when you knew that you were going to be free. Foolish, darling Kitty—you are sure it's me you do love?"

Again she could not speak, but it was her joy that made her silent. She was no more to be disbelieved than an angel appearing in the vault, irradiating the darkness. Flowers sprang beneath her footsteps; her smile was

life. And the memory of his own cynical vision of her smote him with a self-reproach that deepened tenderness. She was only subtle, only sinister, when shut away, unloved. She was womanly, meant for love only, and her folly made her the more lovable. Love was all that was left him. One month of love. His hands yielded to her hands; his eyes answered her eyes. The fragrance of the flowers was in the air, the flutter of heavenly garments. One month of life; but how flat, how mean, how dusty seemed the arduous outer world of the last years; how deep the goblet of enchantment that the unambiguous angel held out to him.

CHAPTER III

THERE were two cups to drink, for he had to put the cup of death to her lips. He told her all as they walked in the garden that afternoon; of the growing gravity of symptoms, the interview with the great specialist to whom his own doctor, unwilling to pronounce a final verdict, had sent him. He begged her to spare him further interviews. He was to die, that was evident; and doctors could do nothing for him. If pain came he promised that he would take what relief they had to give.

She leaned her head against his shoulder, weeping and weeping as they walked.

They were two lovers again, lovers shut into the straitest, most compassed paradise. On every side the iron walls enclosed them; there were no distances; there was no horizon. But within the circle of doom blossomed the mazy sweetness; the very sky seemed to have narrowed to the roofing of a bower.

To be in love again; to feel the whole world

beating like a doubled pulse of you-and-I to and fro between them. She must weep, and he, with this newly born self, must know to the full the pang and bitterness; but the moments blossomed and smiled over the dread; because the dread was there. Sir Walter passed away like a shadow. Kitty saw him and came to her husband from the interview with a composure that almost made him laugh. It would have hurt her feelings for him to laugh at her, and he listened gravely while she told him that Sir Walter, now, was going to accept the big post in India that, for her sake, he had been on the point of refusing. He was going away that very night. She had been perfectly frank with him; she had explained to him—"quite simply and gently" said Kitty—that she had been very foolish and had let her friendship for him, her fondness, and her loneliness mislead her; yes, she had told him quite simply that he would always be a dear, dear friend, but that she was in love with her husband.

The poor toy. The child, with placid hands and unpitying eyes, had snapped it across the middle and walked away from it. He didn't need her to say it again; he saw that she had ceased completely to love Sir Walter. "And weren't you sorry for him at all?" he asked.

"Sorry? Of course, dear, how can you ask?" said Kitty. "I was as tender as possible. But you know, I can't but feel that he deserved punishment. Oh, I know that I did, too!—don't think me hard and self-righteous. But see—see, darling, what you have saved me from! Remember what he wanted me to do. Oh—it was wrong and cruel of him. I shall never be able to forgive him, just because I was so weak—just because I did listen."

"Ah, do forgive him—just because you were so strong that you never let him guess that you were weak," said Holland. He was very sorry for Sir Walter. And he was conscious, since he might not smile outwardly, of smiling inwardly over the ruthlessness of women towards the man, loved no longer, who has tarnished their image in their own eyes. The angel held him fast in Paradise, but something in him, a mere sense of humour, the humour of the outer world, perhaps, escaped her at moments, looked down at her, at himself, at Paradise, and accepted comedy as well as tragedy. It was only to these places of silence, loneliness and contemplation that Kitty did not come.

She shared sorrow and joy. She guessed too well at the terrors; she would be beside

him, her very heart beating on his, through all the valley of the shadow; he would be able to spare her nothing, and even in death he would not be alone. And she was joy. The years of pining and lassitude, the toying with danger, the furnace of affliction that, in the library, had burned the dross from her soul, all had made another woman of Kitty from his girl-bride of six years before. She was joy; she knew how to make it, to give it. She surprised him continually with her inventiveness in rapture. When fear came upon them, she folded it from him with encircling arms. When fear passed, she seemed to lead him out into the dew and sunlight of early morning and to show him new paths, new flowers, new bowers of bliss. All artifice, all self-centred dreaminess, all the littler charms, dropped from her. She was as candid, as single-minded, as passionate as a newly created Eve, and she seemed dowered with a magic power of diversity in simplicity. There was no forethought or plan in her triumph over satiety. Like a flower, or an Eve, she seemed alive with the instinctive impulse that grows from change to change, from beauty to further beauty. Holland, summer-day after summer-day, was conscious only of joy and sorrow; of these, and of the still places where,

sometimes, he seemed to hover above them. The serpent of weariness still slept.

. . . . . .

"Tell me, dearest," said Kitty one day—how they talked and talked about themselves, recapturing every mutual memory, analysing long-forgotten scenes and motives, explaining themselves, accusing themselves, for the joy of being forgiven—"Tell me; you loved me so much that you were willing to give me up to him, to make me happy, and to save me;—but, if you hadn't been going to die—oh darling!—then you would have loved me too much to give me up, wouldn't you?"

His arm was about her, a book between them —unread, it usually was unread—and they were sitting in the re-consecrated summer-house; Kitty had insisted on that punishment for herself, had knelt down before her husband there and, despite his protest, had kissed his hands, with tears; the summer-house had become their sweetest retreat.

He answered her now swiftly, and with a little relief for the obvious answer: "But then I couldn't have set you free, dear."

"No;" Kitty mused. "I see. But—would the fear of losing me have made you *re-fall* in love with me? You know you only re-fell,

darling, only knew how much you cared when you thought I was deceiving you, lying to you, in saying that I loved you; but you would have loved me—not in that dreadful, big, inhuman way—but loved *me,* just *me*—loved me enough to fight for me, wouldn't you?"

He looked into her adoring, insistent eyes and a little shadow of memory crossed his mind. Was she an altogether unambiguous angel? Was it there, the subtlety, in her eyes, her smile; something sweet, insinuating, insatiable? And as she fondled him, leaning close and questioning, it was as though a little eddy of dust from the outer world blew into Paradise through an unguarded gate. Well, why should not the dear angel have a little dust on its shining hair? It was a foolish angel, as he knew; and it lived for love, as he knew; and women who did that and who didn't get loved enough grew to look subtle—he remembered the swift train of thought. But Kitty was loved enough, so that there must be no subtlety to make her beauty stranger and less sweet, and in Paradise one forgot the outer world and need not consider it again; it was done with him and he with it, so that he answered, smiling, "I would have loved you for yourself; I would have fought for you."

"And won me," she murmured, hiding her face on his breast. "Oh, Nick, if only it had been sooner, sooner."

Her suffering sanctified even the shadow; but he remembered it; remembered that the dust had blown in. It lay, though so lightly, on the angel's hair, on the blossoms, on the bowers, and it made him think, at times, of the outer world, of his old judgments and values. He would have had to fight for her, of course; he would have had to save her; but it wouldn't have been because he had "re-fallen." That was a secret that he kept from Kitty; it belonged to the contemplative region of thought, where he was alone. And in Paradise, it seemed, one was forced to tell only half-truths.

Their ties with the outer world were all slackened during these days. No one knew the secret of the doomed honeymoon. The one or two friends who dropped in upon them for a night seemed like quaint marionettes crossing a stage that now and then they agreed to have set up before the bower. These figures, their own relation to them, quickened the sense of secrecy and love. Their eyes sought each other past unconscious eyes; they had lovers' dexterities in meeting unobserved by their guests, gay little escapades when they would run away for

an hour drifting on the river or wandering in the woods. And the formalities and chatter of social life—all these queer people interested in queer things, people who used the present only for the future, who were always planning and looking forward,—made the hidden truths the sharper and sweeter. Nothing, for the two lovers, was to go on. That was the truth that made the marionettes so insignificant and that made their love so deep. There was, for them, no looking forward, no adapting of means to ends. There were no ends, or, rather, they were always at the end. And there was nothing for them to do except to love each other.

"I feel sometimes as if we had become a Pierrot and a Pierrette," Holland said to her. "It's for that, I suppose, that a Pierrot is such an uncanny and charming creature;—the future doesn't exist for him at all."

Kitty, who had always been a literal person, and whose literalness had now become so beautifully appropriate,—for what is literalness but a seeing of the fact as standing still?—Kitty tried to smile but begged him not to jest about such things.

"I'm not jesting, darling. I'm only musing on our strange state. It's like a fairy-tale, the life we lead."

She turned her head, with the pathetic gesture grown habitual with her of late, and hid her eyes on his shoulder. "Oh, darling," she said, "do you hate to leave me!"

She had felt the moment of detached fancy as separative, and he had now to soothe her passionate weeping.

He found that there was a certain pendulum-swing of mood in Paradise. Emotion was the being of this mood, and to keep emotion one must swing.

Either he must soothe Kitty or Kitty must soothe him, or they must transcend the dark necessities of their case by finding in each other a joy including in its ecstasy the sorrow it obliterated. This pendulum swung spontaneously during those first weeks, it swung as their hearts beat, from need to response. And, at the beginning of the third week, it was not so much a faltering in the need or the response that Holland knew, as a mere lessening of the swing;—it didn't go quite so fast or carry him quite so far. He became conscious of an unequal rhythm; Kitty seemed to swing even faster and further.

She saw him as dead; that was the urgent vision that lay behind her demonstrations and ministrations; she saw him as more dead with

every day that passed, and every moment of every day was, to her, of passionate significance. No one had ever been idealised as he was idealised, or clung to as he was clung to. The sense of desperate tendrils enlacing him was almost suffocating, and each tendril craved for recognition; a lapse, a look, an inattention was the cutting of something that bled, and clung the closer. Every moment was precious, and any not given to love was a robbery from her dwindling store. As the time grew less her need for significance grew greater. Her sense of her own tragedy grew with her sense of his, and he must share both. Resignation to his fate was a resignation of her, and a crime against their love. Holland by degrees grew conscious of keeping himself up to a mark.

It was then that the blossoms began to look a little over-blown, the paths to become monotonous, the bowers to grow oppressive with their heavy sweetness as though a noonday sun beat down changelessly upon them. The dew was gone, and though Kitty remained a primitive Eve, he himself knew that in his conscious ardour there hovered the vague presence of something no longer pure, something unwholesome and enervating.

She saw him as dead, and the thought of

death, always with her, renewed her pity and her adoration; he knew that his own background lent a charm enthralling and poignant to his every word, look and gesture. But for him this charm and this renewal were lacking. He could not feel such pity, either for her or for himself. She was to live, poor little Kitty, and, by degrees, the tragedy would fade and the beauty of their last weeks together would remain with her. There was no cavern yawning behind Kitty's figure; life, inexorably, showed him her smiling future.

And, for himself; well, if it was tragic to have to die, it was a tragedy one got used to. He might have felt it more if only Kitty hadn't been there to feel it so superabundantly for him. No: he could keep up; he could see to it that the pendulum didn't falter; but he couldn't hide from himself that its swing was growing mechanical.

By the end of the third week the serpent was awake and walking in Paradise. Holland was tired; profoundly tired.

He found his wife's eyes on him one day as they sat with books under the trees on the lawn. He tried to read the books now, though in a casual manner that would offer no offence to Kitty's unoccupied hands and eyes. He

wanted very much to read and to forget himself—to forget Kitty—for a little while. It was difficult to do this when such a desultory air must be assumed, when he must be ready to answer anything she said at a moment's notice, and must remember to look up and smile at her or to read some passage aloud to her at every few pages. But he had been trying thus to combine oblivion and alertness when a longer interval than usual of the first held him beguiled, and alertness, when it returned, returned too late. Kitty's eyes made him think of the eyes she had gazed with on the day of revelation in the library. They were candid, they were frightened; the eyes of the real child. Now, as then, they were drinking in some new knowledge; a new fear and an old fear, come close at last, were pressing on her. He felt so tired that he would have liked to look away and to have pretended not to see; but he was not so tired as to be cruel, and he tried to smile at her, as, tilting his hat over his eyes so that they were shadowed, he asked her what she was thinking of.

She rose and came to him, kneeling down beside his chair and putting her hands on his shoulders.

"What is the matter, Kitty?" he asked her,

as he had asked on that morning three weeks before.

"Nicholas—Nicholas—are you feeling worse?" she returned.

Holland was surprised and almost relieved. It was no new demand, it was merely a sharper fear. And perhaps she was right, perhaps he was feeling worse and the end was approaching. If so, any languor would be taken as symptomatic of dissolution and not of indifference, and he might relax his hold. Actually a deep wave of satisfaction seemed to go lapping through him.

"I don't feel badly, dear," he said, smoothing back her hair. "You know, I shall suffer hardly any pain; but I do feel very tired."

"In what way tired?" Another alarm was in her voice.

"Bodily fatigue, dear. Of course, one doesn't die without fading."

He felt, when he had said it, that the words, in spite of his care, were cruel; that she would feel them as cruel; he had gone too fast; had tried to grasp at his immunity too hastily.

"Nicholas!" she gasped. "You speak as if I were accusing you!"

"Accusing me, darling! How could you be! Of what?"

"Oh, Nick," she sobbed, hiding her face on his breast,—"Am *I* tiring you? Do you sometimes want me to go away and to leave you more alone?"

His heart stood still. Over her bowed head he looked at the sunlit trees and flowers, the hazy glory of the summer day, a phantasmagoric setting to this knot of human pain and fear, and he said to himself that unless he were very careful he might hurt her irremediably; he might rob her of the memory that was to beautify everything when he was gone.

He had found in a moment, he felt sure, just the right quiet tone, expressing a comprehension too deep for the fear of any misunderstanding between them. "There would be no me left, Kitty, if you went away. I am you—all that there is of me. You are life itself; don't talk of robbing me of any of it; I have so little left."

She was silent for a moment, not lifting her face, no longer weeping. Then in a voice curiously hushed and controlled she said: "How quiet you are; how peaceful you are—how terribly peaceful."

"You want me to be at peace, don't you, dear?"

"You don't mind leaving life. You don't mind leaving me," she said.

"Kitty—Kitty——"

She interrupted his protest: "I've nothing to give you but love; I've never had anything to give you but love. And you are tired of that. You are going, you are going for ever. I shall never see you again. And you don't mind! You don't mind!" She broke into dreadful sobs.

Helpless and tormented he held her, trying to soothe, to reassure, to convince, recovering, even, in the vehemence of his pity, the very tones of passionate love, the personal note that her quick ear had felt fading. She sobbed, and sobbed, but answered him at last, in the pathetic little child language of their first honeymoon that they had revived and enriched with new, sweet follies. But he felt that she was not really comforted, that she tried to delude herself.

"You *do* feel tired—in your body—only in your body?—not in your soul?" she repeated. "It isn't *I*, it's only *you*."

"It's only I who am dying," he almost felt that, with grim irony, he would have liked to answer for her complete reassurance. The

funny, ugly, pathetic truth peeped out at him; she would rather have him die than have him cease to love her.

Soulless sylvan creatures, dryads, nymphs, seemed to gaze from green shadows among branches; the mocking faces of pucks and elves to tilt and smile in the breeze-shaken flowers; —that subtle gaze, that sinister smile, of what did it remind him? All Nature was laughing at him, cruelly laughing; yet all Nature was consoling him.

His love and Kitty's was a flower rooted in death and contradiction. Not affinity, not the growing needs of normal life had brought them together; only the magic of doom and the craving to be loved.

Poor Kitty; she did not know. It was his love she loved, his love she clung to and watched for and caressed. She did not know it, but she would rather have him dead than have him loveless. That was the truth that smiled the sinister smile. One might summon one's courage to smile back at it, but one was rather glad to be leaving it—and Kitty.

And, in the days that followed, when from the pretence of passion he could find refuge only in the pretence of dying, disgust crept into the weariness, he began to wonder when the pre-

tence would become reality. He began to want to die.

This weariness, this irritation, this disgust belonged to life rather than to death; it was a sharp longing to escape from consciousness of Kitty—Kitty, alert and agonised in her suspicion. It was a nostalgic longing for the old, tame, dusty life, his work, his selfless interests. The month was almost up, and yet he was no worse; was he really going to last for another month?

He said to Kitty one morning that he must go up to town. Her face grew ashen. "The doctor! You are going to the doctor, Nicholas?"

"No, no; it's only that Collier is passing through. I heard from him this morning. He wants to see me."

"Why should you bother and think about work now, darling?"

"Why, dearest, I must be of any use I can until the end."

He tried to keep lightness in his voice and patience out of it.

"Let him come down here. I'll write myself and ask him." She, too, was assuming something. She, too, was afraid of him, as he of her.

"He hasn't time. He is on his way to the Continent."

"It will be bad for you to travel now. And London in August!" Her voice was grave, reproachfully tender.

"No, dear, I promise you I will run no risk."

"Promise as much as you will"—now, gaily, sweetly, falsely, but how pathetically, she clasped her hands about his arm;—"but I couldn't think of letting you go alone: you didn't really believe I'd let you go alone, darling: I'll come too, of course. Won't that be fun!—Oh, Nick, you *want* me to come! You don't want to get away!"—The falsity broke down and the full anguish of her suspicion was in her voice and eyes. It was this sincerity that pierced him and made him helpless—sick and helpless. He was able now to blindfold its dreadful clear-sightedness by swift resource: he acted his delight, his gratitude: he hadn't liked to ask his dearest—all the bother for only a day and night; he had thought it would bore her, for he must be most of the time with Collier; but, yes, they would go together, since she petted him so; they would do a play; he would help her choose a new hat; it would be great fun.

Yet, while he knotted the handkerchief

around her eyes, turned her about and confused her sense of direction, as if in a merry game, he knew that fear and suspicion lurked for them both in their playing.

He had, indeed, meant to go to the doctor, but now that must be postponed. The meeting with Collier, his chief at the Home Office, was his only gulp of freedom. At the hotel Kitty waited, and his heart smote him when he found her sitting just as he had left her, mute, white, smiling and enduring. She hadn't even been to her dressmaker's or done any shopping as she had promised him to do. "I know I am absurd; —I know you think me, silly;—but I can't—I can't do anything—think anything—but you!" she said, her lips trembling.

"Absurd, darling, indeed!" he answered, "as if you couldn't think of me and order a new dress at the same time! You know I told you I wanted to see you in a pale blue lawn—isn't lawn the pretty stuff?—And what of the hat? You do want one?—Come, let us go out and I'll help you to choose it."

But she did not want to go out; she only wanted to sit near him, lean her head against him, have him make up to her for the hours of loneliness. He knew that night at the play that she hardly heard a word, and that when

once or twice, he was lured from his absorption and made to laugh, really forgetting, really amused, his laughter hurt her. She gazed at the stage with wide, vacant eyes. He felt the strain of being in town with this desperate devotion beside him worse than the strain of being shut up with it in the country; for there Kitty need hide and repress nothing, and his danger of hurting her by forgetfulness was not so great. He was like a prisoner led about by his gaoler, manacles on his wrists and ankles and a yoke on his neck; there was a certain relief in going back to prison where, at all events, one wasn't so tormented by the sights and sounds of freedom, nor so conscious of chains and the watchful eye upon one.

"This is the end," he thought, as, in the train, they sat side by side, holding hands and very silent, but that, from time to time, when their eyes met, she would smile her doting, hungry smile and murmur: "Darling."

After this, the prison again; the high walls and stifling sweetness of Paradise, and then, thank goodness, release.

How strange a contrast to the journey a month ago, when, stunned, shot through, he had only felt the bliss of home-coming, the longing for the nest. It was all nest now;

there was no space for the fear of death. He was shut in, smothered by this panting breast of love.

CHAPTER IV.

HE knew that evening that Kitty was horribly frightened from the fact that she was horribly careful. She did not once press for assurances or demonstrations of love. She foresaw all his needs, even his need of silence. Delicately assiduous, she pulled his chair near the lamp for him, lit his cigar, cut the pages of his review, even brought a footstool for his feet, saying, when he protested, "You are tired, darling; you must let me wait on you."

"And won't you read, or sew,—or do something, dear?" he asked, as she drew her low chair near his.

"I only want to sit here quietly, and look at your dear face," she said.

And she sat there, quietly, not moving, not speaking, only mutely, gently, fiercely watching him. Holland felt his hand tremble as he turned the pages.

A full hour passed so. Accurately, punctually, he turned the pages; he had not under-

stood one page; and he had not once looked up.

It was almost a sense of nightmare that grew upon him, as if he were going to sit there for ever, hearing the clock tick, hearing Kitty breathe, knowing that he was watched. Fear, pity, and repulsion filled his soul.

He longed at last to hear her voice. He did not dare to hear his own; something in it would have broken and revealed him to her; but if she would but speak the nightmare might pass. And, with the longing, furtively, involuntarily, he glanced round at her.

Her eyes were on him, fixed, shining. How horrible;—how ridiculous. Their gaze smote upon his heart and shattered something,—the nightmare, or the repulsion. An hysterical sob and laugh rose in his throat. He dropped the review, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands, and the tears ran down his face.

She was there, of course, poor creature, there, close, holding him, moaning, weeping with him. He could do nothing but yield to her arms, feel his head pillowed on her breast, and mingle his tears with hers; but horribly, ridiculously, he knew that laughter as well as weeping shook him.

And he heard her saying "Oh, my darling—my darling—is it because you must leave me?" —and heard himself answering "Yes, because I must leave you."

"You love me—so much—so much——"

"So much," he echoed.

And, her voice rising to a cry, he knew how dead, as if sounded from the cavern, his echo had been: "You are not dying! Not now!" And it was again only the echo he could give her: "Not now," it came. Why not now? Why could it not be, mercifully now? When in heaven's name was he going to die?

A strong suspicion rose in him and seemed to pulse into life with the strong beat of his heart. How strong a beat it was; how faint and far any whispers of the old ill. What if he were not going to die? What if he were to go on loving Kitty for a lifetime?

And at that the mere hysterics conquered the tears; he burst out laughing. There, on Kitty's breast, he laughed and laughed, helpless, cruel and ridiculous.

Terrified, she tried to still him. When he lifted his face he saw that hers was ashen, set to meet the tragedy of imminent parting. Did she think it the death rattle?

He flung his head back from her kisses,

flung himself back from her arms. Still laughing the convulsive laugh he got up and pushed away the chair.

"I'm tired—I'm so tired, Kitty," he said.

She sat, her hands fallen in her lap, staring at him.

"You are tired, too," he went on; "it's been a tiring day, hasn't it?—we have been through a lot, haven't we, poor Kitty? Poor Kitty:—do go to bed now. Will you go to bed, and leave me here to rest a little?"

"Nicholas, are you mad—what has happened to you?" she murmured, spellbound, not daring to move.

"Why, I'm ill, you know; I'm very ill. I'm not mad—I'm only so abominably tired. You mustn't ask questions; I can't stand it,—I can't stand it——" And, leaning his arms on the back of the chair, resting his face on them, with tears of sheer fatigue, tears untouched by laughter—"I'm so tired. I want to be alone," he sobbed.

The abominable moments that followed were more full of shame for him than any he had even known:—of shame, and of relief. He had torn his way, with his words, out of the nest; he had fallen to the ground. He was ashamed and horrified, yet—oh, the joy, the

deep joy of being on the ground, out in the cold, fresh world, out of the nest.

At last he heard her speak, slowly, softly, with difficulty, as though she were afraid of angering him. "Shall I go away, Nicholas?"

His face was still hidden. "Yes, do go to bed," he answered.

"I can do nothing for you?"

"Nothing, dear."

"You are not dying?"

"No; I'm not feeling in the least ill."

"You would—send for me—if you were dying?"

"Dear Kitty,—of course."

"And,——" she had risen, not daring to draw near, he knew that the trembling voice came through tears:—"And, you love me? you love me a little?"

"Dear Kitty—of course I love you."

It was over. She was gone. She had not asked for his good-night kiss. It was like a sword between them.

He drew a long breath, lifting his head.

Alone. There was ecstasy in the thought.

He walked out into the garden and looked up at the stars as he walked. There had been no stars in the nest.

He didn't think of death. There had been too much thinking of death; that was one of the things he was tired of. Still less did he want to think of Kitty or of himself.

He looked at the stars and thought of them, but not in any manner emotional or poetical; he thought of astronomical facts, dry, sound, delightful facts: he looked at the darkened trees and dim flowers and thought of botany: the earth he trod on was full of scientific interest; the Pierrots, the fairies and the angels —yes, the angels too—were vanished. He hungered for impersonal interests and information.

Kitty would, indeed, have thought him mad; after the calming walk he came in, lit a cigar and sat for hours studying.

Before Kitty was up next morning he was on his way back to London to see the great specialist.

It was a long visit he paid, an astonishing visit, though the astonishment, really, was not his; life had seemed deeply to have promised something when he had ceased to think of death —when he had ceased to want death, even. That strong beating of his heart had been a mute forestalling. The astonishment was the good, great doctor's, and it was reiterated with

an emphasis that showed something of wounded professional pride beneath it. It was, indeed, humiliating to have made such a complete mistake, to have seen only one significance in symptoms that, to far-sightedness clairvoyant enough, should have hinted, at all events, at another, and, as a result, to have doomed to speedy death a man now obviously as far from dying as oneself: "I can't forgive myself for robbing you of a month of life," the doctor said. "A month with death at the end of it can't be called a month of life."

"Very much of life," said Holland. "So much so that I hardly know yet whether I am glad or sorry that you were mistaken."

He indeed hardly did know. All the way down in the train he was thinking intently of the new complicated life that had been given back to him, and of what he should do with it. At moments the thought seemed to overwhelm him, to draw him into gulfs deeper than death's had been.

All through that month life had meant the moment only. The vistas and horizons seemed now to open and flash and make him dizzy. How could he take up again the burden of far ends and tangled purposes? The dust of com-

ing conflicts seemed to rise to his nostrils. Life was perilous and appalling in its fluctuating immensity.

But, with all the disillusion and irony of his new experience, with all the unwholesome languor that had unstrung his will, some deeper wisdom, also, had been given him. He could turn from the nightmare vision that saw time as eternity.

The walk in the night had brought a message. He could not say it, nor see it clearly, but the sense of its presence was like the coolness and freshness of wings fanning away fevers and nightmare. Somewhere there it hovered, the significance of the message, somewhere in those allied yet contrasted thoughts of eternity and time.

There had been his mistake, his and Kitty's, the mistake that had meant irony and lassitude and corruption. To heap all time into the moment, to make a false eternity of it, was to arrest something, to stop blood from flowing, thought from growing, was to create a nightmare distortion, a monstrous, ballooned travesty of the eternity that, in moving life, could never be more, could never be less, than the ideal life sought unceasingly.

As for Paradise, what more grotesque illusion than to see it with walls around it, what more piteous dream than to feel it narrowed to a nest?

CHAPTER V

HE found Kitty alone in the drawing-room, alone, with empty hands and empty, waiting eyes. He saw that she had wept, and that his departure, only a brief note to break it to her, had added deep indignation to her sorrow. She was no longer timid, nor cowed by the change she felt in him. She had cast aside subtlety and appeal. It was a challenge that met him in her eyes.

He had intended to tell her his news at once and the preparatory smile was on his lips as he entered, a smile, though he did not know this, strangely like that smile of reassurance and consolation that had met her in the library a month ago.

But she gave him no time for a word.

Leaping from her chair she faced him, and with a vision still clearer than that which had showed him subtlety a month ago, he saw now her pettiness, her piteousness, her girlish violence and weakness. "Cruel! Cruel! Cruel!" —she cried.

He remained standing at a little distance from her, looking at her sadly and appealingly. Her words of reproach rushed forth and overwhelmed him like a frenzied torrent.

"To leave me without a word, after last night! You treat me like a dog that one kicks aside because it wearies one with its love. You have no heart—I've felt it for days and days!—No heart! You hate me! You despise me! And what have I done to deserve it but love—love—love you—like the poor dog! But I know—I know—It is Sir Walter. You can't forgive me that— It has poisoned everything—that ignorant folly of mine. At first you thought you could forgive, and then you grew to hate me. And I—I—" her voice choked, gasped into sobs;—"I have only loved you—loved you—more and more——"

"Kitty, you are mistaken," said Holland. "I've never given Sir Walter a thought." It was a reed she grasped at in the torrent, he saw that well;—a desperate hope.

"It's false!" she cried. "You have! You thought at first that you would be magnanimous and save me,—you could be magnanimous because you were going to die—it's easy enough to be magnanimous if you are going to die! easy enough to be peaceful and sad—

and to stand there and smile and smile as if you were only sorry for me. But you found out that you were alive enough to be jealous after all, and that you could not really forgive me, and then you hated me."

"Kitty—you know that you do not believe what you are saying."

"Can you deny that if you had been going to live you would not have forgiven me?"

"I can. I could have forgiven. But then, as I said to you—that day, Kitty, on the lawn, —it would have been more difficult to save you."

"Your love, then, was a pretence to save me!"

"Nothing was pretence, at first," he answered her patiently. "At first I was only glad for your sake that I was going to be out of the way so soon; and when I found that you could care for me again I was glad that I had still a month to live with you."

His words smote on her heart like stones. He saw it and yearned over her pain; but such yearning, such dispassionate tenderness was, he knew, the poison in her veins that maddened her.

She looked, now, at last, at the truth. He had not put it into words, but with the abandon-

ment of her specious hope she saw and spoke it.

"It was, then, because it was only for a month."

He hesitated, seeing, too. "That I was glad?"

"That you loved me."

Across the room, in a long silence, they looked at each other. And in the silence another truth came to him, cruel, clear, salutary.

"Wasn't it, perhaps, for both of us, because it was only for a month?"

The shock went as visibly through her as though it had, indeed, been a stone hurled at her breast. "You mean—you mean—" she stammered—"Oh—you don't believe that I love you— You believe that it could pass, with me, as it has with you!" She threw herself into the chair, casting her arms on the back, burying her face in them.

Holland, timidly, approached her. He was afraid of the revelation he must make. "I believe that you do love me, Kitty, and that I love you; but not in the way we thought. We neither of us could go on loving like that; it was because it was only for a month that we thought we could. It wasn't real."

"Oh," she sobbed, "that is the difference—the cruel difference. You love me in that ter-

rible way—the way that could give me up and not mind; but I am in love with you;—that's the dreadful difference. Men get over it; but women are always in love."

Perhaps Kitty saw further than he did. Holland was abashed before the helpless revelation of a mysterious and alien sorrow. For women the brooding dream; for men the active dusty world. Yet even here, on the threshold of a secret, absurd, yet perhaps, in its absurdity, lovelier than man's sterner visions, he felt that, for her sake, he must draw her away from the contemplation of it. That was one thing he had learned, for Kitty. She, too, must manage to fly—or fall—out of the nest; she must get, in some way, more dust into her life. He had forgotten the news he was to tell her; he had forgotten all but her need.

"Perhaps that is true, dear Kitty," he said; "but isn't it, in a way, that women are *merely* in love. It's not with anybody; or, rather, it is with anybody—with me or with Sir Walter; I mean, anybody who seems to promise more love. Horrible I sound, I know. Forgive me. But I wish I could shake you out of being in love. I want you to be more my comrade than you have been. Don't let us think so much of love."

But Kitty moaned: "I don't want a comrade. I want a lover."

And, in the silence that followed, lifting her head suddenly, she fixed her eyes on him.

"You talk as if we could be comrades," she said. "You talk as if we were to go on living together. What did the doctor say? I don't believe that you are going to die."

He felt ridiculous now. The real tragedy was there, between them; but the tragedy upon which all their fictitious romance had been built was to tumble about their ears.

It was as if he had all along been deceiving, misleading her, acting on false pretences, winning her love by his borrowed funereal splendour. Almost shamefacedly, looking down and stammering over the silly confession, he said: "It was all a mistake. I'm not going to die."

He did not look at her for some moments. He was sure that she was deaf and breathless with the crash and crumbling.

Presently, when he did raise his eyes, he found that she was staring at him, curiously, intently. She had found herself: she had found him; and—oh yes—he saw it—he was far from her. The stare, essentially, was one

of a hard hostility. She had been betrayed and robbed; she could not forgive him.

"Kitty," he said timidly, "are you sorry?"

Her sombre gaze dwelt on him.

"Tell me you're not sorry," he pleaded.

She answered him at last: "How dare you ask me that? How dare you ask me whether I am sorry that you are not going to die? You must know that it is an insult."

"I mean—if I disappointed—failed you so—"

"I must wish you dead? You have a charming idea of me."

How her voice clashed and clanged with the hardness, the warfare, the uproar of the outer world. After the hush, the gentleness of Paradise, it was like being thrown, dizzy and bewildered, among the traffic and turmoil of a great city.

"Don't be cruel," he murmured.

"I? Cruel!" she laughed.

She got up and walked up and down the room. A fever of desperate, baffled anger burned in her. He saw that she did not trust herself to speak. She was afraid of betraying, to herself and to him, the ugly distortion of her soul.

He was not to die; he was not her lover; and Kitty was the primitive woman. She

could be in love, but she could not love unless pity were appealed to. His loss of all passion had killed her romance. His loss of all pathos had, perhaps, killed even human tenderness. For it was he who had drawn away. She was humiliated to the dust.

And that she made a great effort upon herself, so that to his eyes the ugliness might not be betrayed, he guessed presently when, looking persistently away from him and out at the garden—their garden! alas!—where a fine rain fell silently, she said: "I am glad that your sorrow is over. I hope that you will find happier things—and realler things—than you have found in this month. I will remember all that you have said to-day. I think that you have cured me for ever. I shall not be in love again."

"Kitty! Kitty!" he breathed out. She hurt him too much, the poor child, arming its empty heart against him. "Don't speak like that. Remember—the month has been beautiful."

The tears rose in her eyes, but the hostility did not leave them. "Beautiful? When it has not been real?"

"Can't we remember the beauty—make something more real?" he now almost wept. But there it was, the shallow, the hard child's heart. He was not in love with her. And, like a nest

of snakes, the memory of all her humiliations —her appeals, her proffered love, his evasions and withdrawals—was awake within her. She smiled, a smile that, seeking magnanimity, found only bitterness. "You must speak for yourself, dear Nicholas. For me it was real, and you have spoiled the beauty."

The servants came in while she spoke and she moved aside to make way for the placing of the tea-table. Traces of the fever were upon her yet; her delicate face was flushed, her eyes sparkled. But she had regained the place she meant to keep. She would own to no discomfitures deeper than those that were creditable to her. Moving here and there, touching the flowers in a vase, straightening reviews scattered on a table, she was even able to smile again at him a smile almost kind, and keeping, before him, as well as for the servants, all the advantage of composure.

That smile would often meet him throughout life, and so he would see her, moving delicately and gracefully, making order and comeliness about her, for many years. She set the key. It was the key of their future life together, Holland knew, as he heard her say: "Do sit down and rest. You must want your tea after that tiresome journey."

THE WHITE PAGODA

THE WHITE PAGODA

THE drama of the drawing-rooms had begun years ago, but Owen Stacpole did not come into it until the day on which his cousin Gwendolen, after examining the box of bric-à-brac, remarked, refolding the last pieces of china in their dusty newspapers, that they were rubbish, and silly rubbish, too, of just the sort that Aunt Pickthorne had always unerringly accumulated. The box had arrived that morning, a legacy from this deceased relative; it had been brought up to the drawing-room and placed upon a sheet near the fire, so that Mrs. Conyers might examine its contents in comfort, and Owen, while he wrote at the black lacquer bureau in the window, had been aware of Gwendolen's gibes and exclamations behind him. Now, when she asserted that she would send the whole futile collection down to Mr. Glazebrook and see if he would give her enough for it to buy a pair of gloves with, Owen rose

and limped to join her and to look down at the wooden box into which she was thrusting, with some vindictiveness, the dingy parcels.

"Have you looked at them all?" he inquired. "I forget—was your Aunt Pickthorne a Mrs. or a Miss? And how long has it been since she died?"

"About six months, poor old thing. And these treasures have evidently never been dusted since. She was a Mrs. Her husband was old Admiral Pickthorne—don't you remember?—.and they lived, after he retired, at Cheltenham. Two more guileless Philistines I've never known. It used to make me feel quite ill to go and stay with them when I was a girl. I've hardly been at all since then, and that's probably why she selected all the most hideous objects in her drawing-room to leave me. How well I remember that drawing-room! Crocheted antimacassars; and a round, mahogany centre-table on which a lamp used to stand in the evening; and the wall-paper of frosted robin's-egg-blue, with stuffed birds in cases, and terracotta plaques framed in ruby plush, hanging upon it—a perfectly horrible room. Half a dozen of the plaques are in there; the birds she spared me. She had one or two lovely old family things which I'd allowed myself to hope

for; a Spode tea-set I remember. But, no; there's nothing worth looking at."

Mrs. Conyers lightly dusted her hands together, and rose from her knees. She was, at thirty-eight, a very graceful woman; tall, of ample form, and attired with fashionable ease and fluency. Fashion had been a late development with Gwendolen. In her gaunt and wistful girlhood she had worn her hair in drooping Rossettian masses, and her throat had been differently bare. Now she was as accurate as she was easy. Her hair was even a little too sophisticatedly distended, and her long pearl ear-rings, though they became the tender violet of her eyes, emphasized, as her former Pre-Raphaelite ornaments had not seemed to do, a certain genial commonplaceness in the contours of her cheek and chin. But almost fat and decisively unpoetical as she had become, it was undeniable that this last phase of dress and, in especial, these widow's weeds, with sinuous lines of jet and lustrous falls of fringes, became her better than any in which Owen remembered to have seen her.

Gwendolen's drawing-room, too, had undergone, since the days of her girlhood, as complete a metamorphosis as she had. When she had married and left the big house in Kensing-

ton where Owen had spent many a happy holiday—when she had married crabbed old Mr. Conyers, the Chislebridge dignitary, and gone to live in Chislebridge, her convictions had at once expressed themselves luxuriantly in large-patterned wall-papers and deep-cushioned divans and in Eastern fabrics draping the mantelpiece or cast irrelevantly over carved Indian screens. Her teas had been brought in on trays of Indian beaten brass, and the mosque-like opening between the front and back drawing-room had been hung with translucent curtains of beaded reeds, through which one had to plunge as though through a sheet of dropping water. Owen well remembered their tinkle and rattle and the perfume of burning Eastern pastilles that greeted one when, emerging, one found oneself in the dim, rich gloom among the divans and the brasses and the palms. In those days Gwendolen had been draped rather than dressed, and the gestures and attitudes of her languid arms and wrists seemed more adapted to a dulcimer than to a tea-pot. But she dispensed excellent tea, and though her eyes were appropriately yearning, her talk was quite as reassuringly commonplace as Owen had always found it.

It was only in the course of years that the

reed curtains and the carved Indian screens and the divans ebbed away; but the change was complete at last, and he found Gwendolen, with undulated hair puffed over a frame, and a small waist,—large waists not having then come in, —receiving her visitors in the most clear, calm, austere of rooms, with polished floor, Sheraton furniture, and Japanese colour-prints framed in white hanging on pensive spaces of willow-leaf-green wall. Gwendolen talked of Strauss's music and of the New English Art Club, was indignant at the prohibition of "Monna Vanna," and to some no longer apt remark of an aspiring caller answered that to speak so was surely to Ruskinize. He realized on this occasion that Gwendolen had become the arbiter of taste in Chislebridge. He followed her into several drawing-rooms and observed that she had set the fashion in furniture and wall-paper; that some were pushing their way toward Japanese prints, and some were even beginning to babble faintly of Manet. Five years had passed since then, and now, on this his first visit to Chislebridge since old Mr. Conyers's death, another change had taken place. Gwendolen's hips were compressed, her waist was large once more, though of a carefully calculated largeness, and only in a fine bit of the old furniture

here and there did a trace of the former green drawing-room remain. This was certainly the most interesting room that Gwendolen had yet achieved. There had been little character, if much charm, in the green drawing-room; one knew so many like it. With a slight self-discipline, its harmonies were really easy to attain. But it was not easy to attain a mingled richness and austerity; to be recondite, yet lovely; to set such cabinets of rosy old lacquer near such Chinese screens or hang subtle strips of Chinese painting on just the right shade of dim, white wall. It took money, it took time, it took knowledge to find such delicate cane-seated settees framed in black lacquer, and to pick up such engraved glass, such white Chinese porcelain and white Italian earthenware. Melting together in their dim splendour and shining softness, they had so enchantingly arrested Owen the night before that, pausing on the threshold, he had said with a whole-heartedness she had never yet heard from him, "Well, Gwen, yours is the loveliest room I've ever seen."

It was indeed triumphantly lovely, although, examining it more critically by the morning light, he had found slight dissatisfactions. It was perhaps a little too much like an admir-

ably sophisticated curiosity-shop. It was an object to be examined with delight, hardly a subject to be lived with with love. And it almost distressed him to see the touch of genial commonplaceness expressing itself pervasively in the big bowls and jars and vases of pink roses that burgeoned everywhere. They showed no real sense of what the lacquer and glass and porcelain demanded; for they demanded surely a more fragile, less obvious flower. And one or two minor ornaments, though evidently selected with scrupulous conscientiousness, seemed to him equally at fault. Still, he had again that morning, before seating himself to write, repeated in all sincerity, "This is really the loveliest room," and Gwendolen, from where she knelt above Aunt Pickthorne's box, had answered, following his eyes, "I am *so* glad you like it, dear Owen."

Gwendolen was very fond of him, and her fondness had never been so marked. It was of that he had been thinking as he wrote. He had never felt fonder of Gwendolen. Her drawing-room was lovely, her widow's weeds became her, and she was, as she had always been, the kindest of creatures. In every sense the house would be a pleasanter one to stay at than in old Mr. Conyers's lifetime. Owen

had not liked old Mr. Conyers, who had had too much the air of thinking himself an historical figure and his breakfast historical events, who snubbed his wife and quoted Greek and Latin pugnaciously, and took the cabinet ministers and duchesses who sometimes sojourned under his roof, with an unctuousness that made more marked the aridity of his manner toward less illustrious guests. The Conyers had come to count in the eyes of Chislebridge and the surrounding country as the social figure-heads of the studious old town, and Owen had found himself, as Gwendolen's crippled, writing cousin, year by year of relatively less importance in the eyes of Gwendolen's husband. Actually, as it happened, he had during those years become almost illustrious himself; but his austere distinction, such as it was, had been as moonrise rather than dawn, and had left him as gently impersonal as before, and even more impoverished. Negligible-looking as he knew he was, he had sometimes been amused to note old Mr. Conyers's bewilderment when a cabinet minister or a duchess manifested their pleasurable excitement in meeting him. As for Gwendolen, her essential loyalty and kindness had always remained the same since the days when she had protected him from the sal-

lies of her boisterous brothers and sisters in the Kensington family mansion—the same till now. Last night and to-day he had recognised a difference. He wondered whether he was a conceited fool for imagining in Gwendolen a dwelling tenderness, a brooding touch, indeed, of reminiscent wistfulness. Was it to show an unbecoming complacency if he allowed his mind to dwell upon the possibilities that this development in Gwendolen presented to his imagination? He was delicate and poor and, despite a large visiting-list, he was lonely. He was fond of Gwendolen and of her two nice, dull boys. She amused him, it was true, as she had always amused him; for though her drawing-room had become interesting, though she had developed a sense of humour, or at least the intention of humorousness, though she often attempted playfulness and even irony, she was still at heart as disproportionately earnest as she had been in youth. But Gwendolen would make no romantic demands upon him, and she would not expect him to take even red lacquer as seriously as she did, or to follow with the same breathlessness the erratic movements of modern æstheticism. She was accustomed to his passive unresponsiveness, and would resent it no more in the husband than

in the friend. Altogether, as he sat there writing at Gwendolen's lovely bureau, he knew that a sense of homely magic grew upon him.

Next morning, wandering about the pleasant streets of the old town, he found himself before the window of Mr. Glazebrook's curiosity-shop —a shop well known to more than Chislebridge. He paused to look at the objects disposed with a dignified reticence against a dark background, and his eye was attracted by a very delightful red lacquer box that at once made him think of Gwendolen's drawing-room. Just the thing for her, it was. But as he entered the shop, Mr. Glazebrook leaned from within and took it from its place in the window. He was showing it to another customer.

Owen now quite vehemently longed to possess the box, which, he saw, as Mr. Glazebrook displayed it, was cunningly fitted with little inner segments, beautifully patterned in gold. Feigning an indifferent survey of the shop, he lingered near, hoping that his rival would relinquish her opportunity.

"Five pounds! O dear, that is too much for me, I'm afraid," he heard her say, and, at the voice, he turned and looked at her. The voice was unusual—a rapid, rather husky voice that made him think of muffled bells or snow-bound

water, gay in rhythm, yet marred in tone, almost as though the speaker had cried a great deal. She was an unusual figure, too, though he could not have said why, except that her dress seemed to recall bygone fashions quaintly, though without a hint of dowdiness or affectation. She wore a skirt and jacket of soft gray, with pleated lawn at neck and wrists, and her small gray hat was wreathed with violets. She held the lacquer box, and her face, rosy, crisp, decisive, and showing, like her voice, a marred gaiety, expressed her reluctant relinquishment and her strong desire. Owen had seen a child look at a forbidden fruit with just such an expression and he suddenly wished that he could give the box to her rather than to Gwendolen, to whom five pounds was a matter of small moment.

"I think I mustn't," she repeated, after a further hesitation, and setting the box down with cherishing care. "Not to-day. And I have so much red lacquer. It's like dram-drinking."

Mr. Glazebrook smiled affably. He was evidently on old-established terms with his customer. "Perhaps you'd like to look round a bit, Mrs. Waterlow," he suggested. "There are some nice pieces of old glass in the inner

room, quite cheap, some of them—a set of old champagne glasses." Mrs. Waterlow, saying that she wanted some old champagne glasses, moved away.

"Do you think the lady has given up that box?" Owen asked. "I don't want to buy it if there's a chance of her changing her mind."

Mr. Glazebrook said that there was no such chance, the lady being one who knew her own mind; so the box was bought and Owen ordered it to be sent to Gwendolen. He said then that he would like to have a look round, too. He really wanted to have another look at the lady with the rosy face and the small gray hat trimmed with violets. He peered into cabinets ranged thickly with old glass and china, examined the Worcester tea-set disposed upon a table and the case of Chinese tear-bottles and Japanese netzukés, and presently made his way into the smaller, dimmer room at the back.

"Oh, Mr. Glazebrook," said the lady in gray. She had heard his step, but had not turned. She was kneeling before an open packing-case and holding an object that she had drawn from it. Owen suddenly recognised the case. It was the one that Gwendolen yesterday had sent down to Mr. Glazebrook. He called this person, raising his hat, and the lady looked round

at him, too preoccupied to express her recognition of her mistake by more than a vague murmur of thanks. "Mr. Glazebrook," she said, holding up a whitish object, "may I have this? Is it expensive?"

"Well, really, I only glanced over the box. A customer sent it down to me to dispose of, and I didn't think there was anything in it worth much. Let me see, Mrs. Waterlow; it's a pagoda, I take it, a Chinese pagoda. We've had them from time to time, in ivory and smaller than this."

"This is in porcelain," said the lady, "and beautifully moulded."

"I see, I see," said Mr. Glazebrook, taking the fragile top segment of the disjointed pagoda in his hand, and rather at a loss; "and it's slightly damaged."

The lady in gray evidently was not a shrewd bargainer. "Only a little," she said. "One or two bits have been chipped out of the roofs, and it's lost one or two of its little crystal rings; but I think it's in quite good condition, and I have it all here." She was placing one segment upon the other. "They are all made to fit, you see, with the little openings in each story."

She had built it up beside her as she knelt

on the floor, and it stood like a fragile, fantastic ghost, with the upward tilt of its tiled roofs, its embossed patterns, and the crystal rings trembling from each angle of the roofs like raindrops. "What a darling!" said Mrs. Waterlow. "How much do you ask for it, Mr. Glazebrook?"

Mr. Glazebrook, adjusting his knowledge of the limitations of Mrs. Waterlow's purse to his present appreciation of the pagoda and of her desire for it, said genially, after a moment, that from an old customer like herself he would ask only forty-five shillings.

"Well, I think it's a great bargain, Mr. Glazebrook," said Mrs. Waterlow. "And I'll have it."

"Shall I send it round?" Mr. Glazebrook asked.

"Yes, please; or, no, it isn't heavy,"—she lifted it with both hands, rising with it and looking like a Saint Barbara holding her tower,—"I can manage it to just round the corner. Wrap it up for me, and I'll carry it off myself."

When Owen saw his cousin again at lunch, the red lacquer box had not yet arrived, and, with a touch of friendly mockery, he said:

"Well, you have been unlucky, my dear

Gwen. There was the most charming piece of old Chinese porcelain in that scorned Cheltenham box, and I saw Mr. Glazebrook sell it this morning to a lady who wasn't to be put off by dust and newspapers and plush-framed plaques. She carried it off in triumph, saying that it was a great bargain. And so it was; but she might have had it for half the money if she hadn't informed Mr. Glazebrook of its probable value."

Gwendolen fixed her mild, violet eyes upon him. "A piece of old Chinese porcelain? Do you mean that silly white pagoda?"

"You did see it, then?"

"See it? Haven't I seen it all my life? It stood on a purple worsted mat on a little bamboo table between the Nottingham lace curtains in one of Aunt Pickthorne's drawing-room windows, and looked like some piece of childish gimcrackery bought at a bazaar, where, I'll wager, she did buy it."

"Well, Mrs. Waterlow evidently didn't think it gimcrackery, or, if she did, she didn't mind. It looked to me, I confess, an exquisite thing. But her admiration may have lent it its enchantment."

Gwendolen's eyes now fixed themselves more searchingly than before.

"Mrs. Waterlow? Did Mrs. Waterlow buy it? How did you know it was Mrs. Waterlow? I thought you'd never met her."

"I haven't; but I heard Mr. Glazebrook call her by her name. She'd wanted to buy a red lacquer box that I spotted in the window and had gone in to get for you, my dear Gwen. It was too expensive for her,—so that it is yours,—and she went rummaging into the back shop and found your box with the things just as you and Mr. Glazebrook had left them, and in no time she'd disinterred the pagoda."

Gwendolen apparently was so arrested by his story that she forgot for the moment to thank him for the lacquer box.

"Do you know her?" he asked.

"Know her? Know Cicely Waterlow? Why, I've known her since she first came to live here, years ago. She's a very dear friend of mine," Gwendolen said, adding: "How much did she pay for it? That wretched man gave me only fifteen shillings for the lot."

"He made her pay forty-five shillings for the pagoda. I suspect myself that it's worth ten times as much. Does she care for things, too—lacquer and engraved glass?"

Gwendolen still showed preoccupation and, he fancied, a touch of vexation.

"Care for them? Yes; who with any taste doesn't care for them? Cicely has very good taste, too, in her little way. She doesn't know anything, but she picks up ideas and puts them together very cleverly. I can't help thinking that she'd never have given the pagoda a thought if my white porcelain hadn't educated her. I really can't believe that it's good, Owen."

Owen waived the point.

"Who is Mr. Waterlow?" he asked.

"He has been dead for fifteen or sixteen years. He died only a year after their marriage. A very delightful man, so people say who knew him. And Cicely lost her little girl, to whom she was passionately devoted, five years ago; she has never really recovered from that. She used to be so pretty, poor Cicely! She's lost it all now. She cried her very eyes out. She has a little money and lives with her mother-in-law, old Mrs. Waterlow, who is very fond of her. They don't entertain except in the quietest way, or go out much, and I do what I can to give Cicely a good time. I often have her here to tea when I have interesting people staying."

"Oh, that's good. Do count me as interesting enough and ask her while I'm here."

"Interesting enough, my dear Owen! I don't suppose that Cicely often has a chance of meeting such an interesting man as you. Of course I'll ask her," said Gwendolen. Then, remembering his gift: "It *was* nice of you to get me a red lacquer box, Owen. I adore red lacquer, and I'm quite sure, whatever you and Cicely Waterlow may say, that it's worth a hundred of your white pagodas."

Mrs. Waterlow came to tea next afternoon, the last of Owen's stay. The drawing-room was crowded, and Owen, when she was announced, was enjoying a talk with a dismal-looking old philosopher who had plaintive, white hairs on his nose and trousers that bagged irremediably at the knees.

"Yes, indeed, I know her well," said Professor Selden, as Owen questioned him. "I play chess with her once a week. Her little girl was a great pet of mine. You never saw the little girl?"

"Never, and I've not yet met Mrs. Waterlow. She is most charming-looking."

"The little girl was so much like her," said Professor Selden, sadly. "Yes, she is a charming woman. Don't let me keep you from meeting her. I am going to sit down here while our young friend Dawkins plays. You know

Dawkins? Between ourselves, Mrs. Conyers thinks too highly of him."

Mrs. Waterlow's eyes turned upon him as he limped up to her and Gwendolen, and smiling, she said, "Why, I saw you yesterday in Mr. Glazebrook's shop."

"Yes," said Owen, "and there is the red lacquer box."

"And you, Cicely, bought my pagoda," said Gwendolen.

"Your pagoda?" Mrs. Waterlow questioned, her eyes, that seemed to open with a little difficulty, resting on her hostess with some surprise. "Was the pagoda yours?"

"Yes, mine," said Gwendolen. "It came in a box of rubbish,—you saw the kind of rubbish,—a legacy from an old aunt, and I bundled it off to Glazebrook. Owen says it is really good. Is it?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Mrs. Waterlow.

"I'm sure it is," said Owen, "and I liked the accuracy with which you fell in love with it at first sight."

"I did fall in love with it, good or bad," said Mrs. Waterlow. "Don't tell me that you want it back again, Gwendolen. But if it was a mistake, of course——"

He recognised in her the note of guilelessness and, with some decision, for he actually perceived an eagerness in Gwendolen's glance, interposed with, "But Gwendolen thinks it gimcrackery, and wouldn't have it at any price. Isn't it so, Gwendolen?"

Poor Gwendolen was looking a little glum; but she was the most unresentful of creatures.

"Indeed, it is," she said. "I did think it gimcrackery; but, to tell the truth, I never really saw it at all. I can't believe you'd have seen it, Cicely, standing on its worsted mat in my Aunt Pickthorne's drawing-room. But I wouldn't dream, of course, of taking it back; and if it's really good, I'm more glad than I can say that my loss should be your gain. Now, won't you and Owen sit down here and listen to my wonderful Perceval Dawkins? Oh, he is going to astonish the world some day."

Mrs. Waterlow and Owen, in the intervals of the ensuing music, talked together. Seen more closely, he found that her face, though not beautiful, was even more singularly delightful than he had thought it. She had eyes merry, yet tired, like those of a sleepy child, and sweet, small, firm lips and a glance and smile at once very frank and very remote. There was about her none of that aroma of sorrow that some

women distil from the tragedies of their lives, and wear, even if unconsciously, like an allurement. He felt that in Mrs. Waterlow sorrow had been an isolating, a bewildering, a devastating experience, making her at once more ready to take refuge in the trivialities of life and more unable to admit an intimacy into the essentials. Yet the spring of vitality and mirth was so strong in her that in all she said he felt a quality restorative, aromatic, fragrant, as if he were walking in spring woods and smelt everywhere the rising sap and the breath of violets. She was remote, blighted, yet buoyant. When she rose to go, he realised with sudden dismay that to-day was his last in Chislebridge and that he should not see her again for who knew how long.

"Is the pagoda placed?" he asked her. "Does it fulfil your expectations?"

"Yes, indeed," she said. "I spent two hours yesterday in washing and mending it. It is immaculate now, as lovely as a pearl."

"I wish I could see it," said Owen.

"Why, pray, then, come and see it. Can you come to tea with me and my mother-in-law to-morrow?"

"I'm going away to-morrow," said Owen, dismally. And then he bethought him. "Can't

I walk back with you now? Is it too late? Only five-thirty."

"Not in the least too late. Mamma will still be having tea, and she loves people to drop in. But ought you to come away?" Mrs. Waterlow glanced round the crowded room.

"I'll not be missed," he assured her with some conscious speciousness.

Gwendolen, indeed, had time only for a little stare of surprise when he told her that he was going to look at the pagoda with Mrs. Waterlow. She was receiving new guests, richly furred and motor-veiled ladies who had come in from the country and were expatiating over the beauties of the red lacquer cabinets, Gwendolen's latest acquisitions.

"That will be delightful," she said; "and now Owen will see that sweet drawing-room of yours, dearest. You have made it so pretty!"

Owen observed that Mrs. Waterlow, while maintaining all the suavities of intercourse, did not address Gwendolen as dearest.

It was not far to Mrs. Waterlow's, and he said, in reply to her question, that he liked walking, if she didn't mind going slowly on his account. He found himself telling her, then, about his lameness. A bad fall while skating

in boyhood had handicapped him for life. The lamps had just been lighted and the evening of early spring was blurred with mist. Catkins hung against a faintly rosy sky, and in the gardens that they passed the crocuses stood thickly. Owen had a sense of adventure poignant in its reminiscent magic. Not for years had he so felt the savour of youth. He realised, with a deep happiness, that Mrs. Waterlow liked him; sometimes she laughed at things he said, and once or twice when her eyes turned on him he fancied in them the same expression of happy discovery with which she had looked at the pagoda. Well, he reflected, if she thought him delightful, too, she had had to get through a great many dusty newspapers to find him.

Mrs. Waterlow lived, away from the gardened houses of Chislebridge, in a small but rather stately house with a Georgian façade which stood on one of the narrower, older streets. They went up two or three stone steps from the pavement and knocked at a very bright and massive knocker, and the door was opened by a middle-aged Quakerish maid. The drawing-room was on the ground floor, and Mrs. Waterlow led him in.

Owen's astonishment, when he entered,

prompted him to stand still and to gaze about him; but luckily he could not yield to the impulse, for he had to cross to the fire, near which, behind her tea-table, old Mrs. Waterlow sat, and had to be presented to her and to the middle-aged, academic-looking lady who was having tea with her. He was glad of the respite, for he had received a shock.

Old Mrs. Waterlow had dark, authoritative eyes and white hair much dressed under black lace, and the finest of hands, decorated with old seals and old diamonds. She must, he felt, be a companion at once inspiriting and disquieting, for she had the demeanour of a naughty, haughty child, and, as she held Owen in talk for some moments, he perceived that her conversation was of a sort to cause alarm and amusement in her listeners. Poor old Professor Selden, who was mentioned, offered her an opportunity for the frankest witticisms, and,—when her daughter-in-law protested,—"Yes, dear, I know you are fond of him," the old lady replied, "and so am I; but he is, all the same, very like a damp potato that has begun to sprout."

"Now look at my pagoda, Mr. Stacpole," said young Mrs. Waterlow, laughing, yet, he saw, not pleased, and turning from the fire where

she had been standing with her foot on the fender.

"Does Mr. Stacpole care for bric-à-brac, too?" old Mrs. Waterlow inquired. "Cicely came home with this last treasure in as much triumph as if some one had left her a fortune. I resent the pagoda because it means that she will go without a spring hat. She is always coming home in triumph and always doing without hats; and I sit here without an atom of taste, and get the credit for hers. Frankly, Sybilla, my dear," she addressed the academic lady, "I'd be quite content to sit upon red reps and to cover my tea-pot with a pink satin cosy with apple-blossoms painted on it. I had such a cosy given to me this Christmas; but Cicely wouldn't let me use it."

Owen had risen to face his ordeal. Mrs. Waterlow, he had seen it in the first astonished glance, had, like everybody else in Chislebridge, been imitating Gwendolen, and his whole conception of her was undergoing a reconstruction. He followed her to the table on which the white pagoda stood, glancing about him and taking in deep drafts of disillusion. Red lacquer and Japanese prints, white porcelain and dimly shining jars of old Venetian glass—it was a replica, even to its white walls, of Gwendolen's

drawing-room, but hushed and saddened, as it were, humbly smiling, with folded hands and no attempt at emulation. And in the midst, beautifully in place on its little black lacquer table, was the pagoda, offering him not a hint of help, but seeming rather, to smile at him with a fantastic and malicious mirth. He was aware, as from the pagoda he brought his eyes back to young Mrs. Waterlow, that he was dreadfully sorry. In another woman he would not have given the naïve derivativeness a thought; but in her, whom he had felt so full of savour and independence? One thing only helped him, beside the effortless atmosphere of the room, and that was the fact—he clung to it—that the glasses set everywhere among the red and black and white were filled not, thank goodness! with pink roses, but with poppy anemones, white and purple and rose. And the first thing he found to say of the pagoda to Mrs. Waterlow was, "It looks lovely in here," and then, turning to the nearest bowl of delicate colour, he added, "and how beautifully these flowers go with your room!"

He wondered, as their eyes met over the anemones, whether Mrs. Waterlow guessed his discomfiture.

When he saw Gwendolen that evening she

asked him at once whether he liked old Mrs. Waterlow. She did not ask him how he liked young Mrs. Waterlow's drawing-room, and he reflected that this was really very magnanimous of her.

"She seems a witty old lady," he said. "Her daughter-in-law can't be dull with her."

"She's witty, but I always feel her a little spiteful, too," said Gwendolen. "We never get on, she and I. I hate hearing my neighbours scored off, and she has such an eye for people's foibles. I don't think that Cicely always quite likes it, either; but they are devoted to each other. If it weren't for old Mrs. Waterlow, I'd try to see a great deal more of Cicely; I'm really fond of her."

. . . . . .

He did not go to Chislebridge for another six months. Gwendolen asked him very pressingly on various occasions, but twice he was engaged and once ill and too depressed and jaded to make the effort. It was the time of all others when Gwendolen and her ministrations would have been most acceptable, but he shrank from submitting himself to their influences, feeling that in his very need he might find too great a compulsion. The thought of Gwendolen and of her possible place in his life must be adjourned

—adjourned until she was well out of her mourning and he was able to meet it more impartially.

He saw Gwendolen in London and gave her and her boys tea at his rooms, the dingily comfortable rooms near Manchester Square from which for many years he had not had the initiative to move. There was more potency, he found, in the imaginary Gwendolen than in the real one. The sight of her brought back vividly the thought of Mrs. Waterlow. Curiously, they seemed to have spoiled each other. Gwendolen had all the ethical advantages and even, if it came to that, all the æsthetic ones; yet, ambiguous as the image of the other had become, its charm challenged Gwendolen's virtues and Gwendolen's achievements. He even felt that he could be sure of nothing until he next stayed with Gwendolen, when he must see Mrs. Waterlow and weigh the possible friendship with her, tarnished though it were, against the comfortable solutions that Gwendolen held out to him. Again, curiously, he knew that the two could not be combined.

Gwendolen, however, was gone away to the south of France when he wrote to her in November and asked if he might stop a day and night on his way through Chislebridge to a

country week-end. But he had a two-hours' wait at the station, and he suddenly determined, when he found himself on the platform, to go and have tea with Mrs. Waterlow.

He drove up to the peaceful street where, above the college wall that ran along its upper end, a close tracery of branches showed against the sky, and he found that a welcoming firelight shone in the spacious windows of the Georgian house. His dismay, therefore, was the more untempered when the mildly austere maid told him that Mrs. Waterlow was away. His pause there on the threshold expressed his condition, and the maid suggested that he might care to come in and see old Mrs. Waterlow. This, he felt, was indeed better than not to go in at all. So he was led for a second time into the drawing-room.

He had been obliged on the former visit to conceal astonishment; but now he found himself alone, and no concealment was needed. And the former astonishment was slight compared with this one. He felt almost giddy as he gazed about him. Nothing was the same. Everything was fantastically, incredibly different, except—his eye caught it with a sharpened pang of wonder—the white pagoda; for there, in the centre of the room, upon a round, ma-

hogany table, with heavily bowed and richly carven legs, the white pagoda stood, and under it an old bead mat,—a mat of faded, old blue beads,—his eyes were riveted on the pagoda and its setting,—of white and gray and blue beads dotted with pink rosebuds. At regular intervals, raying out from the centre, books were placed upon the table—small, sober books bound in calf.

So the pagoda stood, the pivot of an incredible room; yet, inconceivable as it seemed, as right there, all its exquisite absurdity revealed, as it had been right in the other. It was the one link that joined them, the one thread in the labyrinth of his astonishment; and it seemed, with its ambiguous, fantastic smile, to symbolize its absent owner. Was it an exquisite, extravagant, elaborate joke that she and the pagoda were having together?

For the whole room was now a joke. It was furnished with a suite of black satin—sofas, easy-chairs, little chairs with carved, excruciating backs, all densely buttoned and richly fringed. Over the backs of the easy-chairs were laid antimacassars of finely crocheted white lace. Upon two tall pieces of mahogany, ranged up and down with knobbed drawers and recalling in their decorous solidity

the buttoned bodices of mid-Victorian matrons, stood high-handled, white marble urns. An oval gilt mirror hung above the mantelpiece, and upon it stood two lustres ringed with prisms of glass and a little clock of gilt and marble, ornamented with two marble doves hovering over a gilt nest wherein lay marble eggs. Between the clock and the lustres, on either side, was a vase of Bohemian glass, each holding a small nosegay of red and white roses. Mahogany footstools with bead-worked tops stood before the fire, and upon the walls hung, exquisite in their absurdity, like the pagoda, a whole botanical series of flat, feeble old flower-pieces, neatly coloured drawings, as accurate and as lifeless as vigilant, uninspired labour could make them.

No, it was a dream, an insane, delightful dream; for, with it all, above it all, how and why he could not say, the room was delightful. It seemed to set one free from some burden of appreciation that all unconsciously one had been carrying and had been finding heavy. One could live in it, laughing at and with it. For it all laughed—surely yes; and the elfish chorus was led by the white pagoda, standing like a Chinese Pierrot, at the centre of the revels.

Old Mrs. Waterlow at last came sailing in, and her black lace shawl and lace-draped head looked as appropriate in the room as everything else seemed to do. Her eyes dwelt on him with a certain fixity, and in them he seemed to read further significances. They held an intention, gay, precise, such as he had felt in the room; and they held, too, it might be, a touch of light-hearted cruelty.

"Yes, isn't it changed?" she said, and he knew that his state of astonishment had spoken from his face.

He stared round him again, smiling.

"It makes me feel," he said, "like the old woman in the nursery rhyme whose skirts were cut up to her knees while she was asleep. One says, 'If I be I.' "

"And I'm the little dog," said Mrs. Waterlow; "but one who doesn't bark at you, so that you can be assured of your identity. I am really more aware of my own in this room than in any I've lived in for years. It is like one of the rooms of my girlhood. Rooms weren't so important then as they are now, and the people who lived in them, I sometimes think, were more so. It amuses me nowadays," said the old lady moving to her tea-table and seating herself, "to observe the way in which people

are assessed by their tastes and their belongings. You say of some one that she is a dull or a disagreeable woman, and the answer and rebuke you receive is, 'Oh, but she has such wonderful Chinese screens!' Sit down here, Mr. Stacpole. It is very nice to see you again."

"But tell me, where is the other room?" Owen asked, drawing his chair to the table, "Is it disbanded, dissolved, gone for ever?"

Mrs. Waterlow looked at him with an air of half-malicious mystery.

"That is a secret, my own little secret, just as this room is, in a way, a little joke which, for my sake, Cicely has made for me. It was finished last week, by the way, and you are the first person to see it. Your cousin is in the south of France, isn't she?" said Mrs. Waterlow, with bland inconsequence.

"Yes; I'm only passing through. Gwendolen's been gone for nearly a month."

"Yes; I know," Mrs. Waterlow pursued, still with the genial blandness. "And as to our little joke, Mr. Stacpole, this room, in fact, is in many ways a room of my girlhood. The furniture was my mother's, and Cicely, when the idea struck her, had it brought from the garret of my old home, where it has stood in

disgrace for many a year. She has been clever about it, hasn't she?"

"It's genius," said Owen. "What made her think of it?" And then, with a pang, he wondered whether Gwendolen had thought of it first. Was it imaginable that Gwendolen could have turned away from beauty and plunged herself into such gay austerities of ugliness?

"Well, things are in the air, you know," said Mrs. Waterlow, pouring out the tea,—"that's what Cicely always says, at all events,—reactions, repulsions, wearinesses. This room is, she says, a discipline."

"Things in the air": had Gwendolen felt them first, and Mrs. Waterlow felt them after her? This question of priority became of burning interest for him.

"The trouble is that one may get too much of any discipline," he commented, "if it ceases to be self-inflicted and is imposed upon us. How would your daughter like it if all Chislebridge took to buttoned black satin and old flower-pieces? It's as an exception that it has its charm and its meaning. But if it became a commonplace?"

"Well, that's the point," said old Mrs. Waterlow. "Will it? It has very much vexed me for years to watch Chislebridge picking Cicely's

brains. And I said to her that I wondered whether it would be possible for her to make a room that wouldn't be copied, and she said that she believed she could. If she could achieve ugliness, she said—downright ugliness, she believed they would fall back. The room is a sort of wager between us, for I am not at all convinced that she will succeed. Sheep, you know, will leap into the ditch if they see their leader land there."

Owen's head was whirling. It was as though suddenly the little crystal rings of the pagoda had given out a sportive, significant tinkle. This, then, was what it meant? It was a jest, a game; but it was also a trap. For whom? Chislebridge, on old Mrs. Waterlow's lips, could mean only Gwendolen. He did not know quite what he hoped or feared, but he knew that he must conceal from old Mrs. Waterlow his recognition of her meaning.

"I felt from the first moment that I saw her in the curiosity-shop that Mrs. Waterlow was the sort of person who would always find the white pagodas," he said, smiling above his perturbation; "but I shouldn't have supposed that Chislebridge was intelligent enough, let us put it, to realise it, too, and to follow her lead."

"It's not that they realise it," the old lady interpreted, salting her scone; "it's something deeper than realisation. It's instinct—the instinct of the insignificant for aping the significant. They would probably be annoyed if they were told that they aped Cicely. They hardly know they do it, I will say that for them, if it's anything to their credit. And then since she is poor and they—some of them—rich, their copies are seen by a hundred to the one who sees her original, and Cicely, to some people, I've no doubt of it, seems the ape. It has very much vexed me," Mrs. Waterlow repeated.

Owen, for all his loyal feint of unconsciousness, was growing rather angry with Gwendolen.

"I don't wonder that it should," he said. "It vexes me to hear about it. Has it gone on for long?"

"Ever since we came to live here after my son's death. People at that time had draped, crowded drawing-rooms,—you remember the dreadful epoch. The more pots and pans and patterns and palms they could squeeze into them, the better they were pleased. Cicely had simple furniture and quiet spaces and plain green wall-paper when no one

else in Chislebridge had. She fell in love with Japanese prints in Paris and bought them when no one else in Chislebridge thought of doing so.—It's wrong, now, I hear, to like them. Chinese paintings are the correct thing.—Chislebridge stared at them and at her empty room, and wondered how she could care for those hideous women. They stared only for a year or two. When they saw that she was quite indifferent to their opinion and intended to remain in the ditch, they jumped in after her. I was amused when I first saw Japanese prints on some one else's green walls and heard the Goncourts and Whistler being quoted to Cicely. Then by degrees Cicely got tired of green paper, especially since everybody in Chislebridge by then had it, and she put, with her white walls, the red lacquer and the glass and that beautiful old set of cane-seated furniture that you saw; and no one else in Chislebridge at that time had white walls or a scrap of lacquer. She shifted and rearranged like a bird building its nest, and Chislebridge stared again and said that the white walls were like a workhouse; and then they began to look for lacquer and to put up white paper. Her very grouping has been copied, the smallest points of adjustment. It's not," Mrs. Waterlow pur-

sued, "that I mind people imitating, if they do it frankly and own themselves plagiarists. We must all see the things we like for the first time. But it's not because they like the things that they have them; they have them because some one else likes them. They dress themselves in other people's tastes and make a fine figure as originators." The vexation of years was crystallized in the lightness and crispness of her voice.

Poor, stupid Gwendolen! After all, one must not be too hard on her. He felt Mrs. Waterlow to be so hard that he reacted to something approaching pitying tolerance. Gwendolen could be stupid in such good faith. There was nothing, when he came to think of it, surprising in this revelation of her stupidity, nothing painful, as there had been in suspecting Cicely Waterlow of stupidity. Gwendolen was so sincerely unaware of having no ideas of her own. He wondered, as he said good-bye to old Mrs. Waterlow and told her that he felt convinced that she had at last reached a haven, whether she guessed that she had made him happy rather than unhappy.

She had made him so happy, with his recovered ideal, that as he drove away it was with a definite thrust of fear that he suddenly remem-

bered Gwendolen's kindly criticism of old Mrs. Waterlow. Was it not possible, after all, that she had been indulging in sheer malice at Gwendolen's expense? Wasn't it possible that Gwendolen and Cicely Waterlow had had the same inspirations independently? But no two people could stumble at once on such a drawing-room as that he had just left. Horrid thought —what if Gwendolen's drawing-room at this moment showed just such a singular reversion to ugliness? After his delicious relief, he could not bear the doubt.

He drove to Gwendolen's. Yes, the old housekeeper, who knew him, said he could of course go up and look at the red lacquer. The red lacquer! He could almost have embraced her for the joy her words gave him. Gwendolen would not have retained red lacquer with a black satin suite. And on the threshold of Gwendolen's drawing-room he received full reassurance. The lovely room was intact. The blacks and whites and reds and golds were all there, unchanged, not a breath of the ambiguous discipline upon them. And in the midst of them all it was not Gwendolen, but Cicely Waterlow, whom he seemed to see smiling upon him, merry, tired, and tolerant. She had, as it were, demonstrated her claim not only to her

present, but to her past. For if she had not copied Gwendolen in the mid-Victorian backwater, why should she have copied her in this? She had been first in both, and in her backwater she was now safe.

. . . . . .

MANY months passed before he saw Gwendolen's drawing-room again. He was felled early in the winter by a long and dangerous illness. When he was able to crawl about, he went to the south of France and stayed there for over a year. He was so ill, so tired, and so weak that, if Gwendolen and the boys hadn't joined him, if she hadn't nursed and amused and encouraged him from day to day, he felt that he should probably have died and made an end of it. Gwendolen was more than kind. She was at once tender and tactful, and the only claim she made was that of her long-standing solicitude on his account. Upon this, as upon a comfortable, impersonal cushion that she adjusted for his weary head, she invited him to lean, and upon it for months of dazed invalidism and dubious convalescence he did lean. Lapped round by this fundamental kindness, the flaws and absurdities of Gwendolen's character disappeared. The long pearl earrings dangled now over the most delicious

beef-teas, which she herself made for him; the graceful hands could perform efficient tasks. Of how very little importance it was that a woman should not show originality in her drawing-room when she could show in taxing daily intercourse such wisdom and resource and sweetness! Life had contracted about them, and on these simple and elementary terms he found that Gwendolen neither bored nor ruffled him. When she at last left him he knew that the bond between them, unspoken as it remained, was stronger than it had ever yet been, and that when he next saw her he would probably find it the most natural of things to ask her to marry him, and to take care of him for ever. Poor, good, kind Gwendolen! It was with a pensive humility and mirth that he resigned himself to the thought of the bad bargain she would make.

He came back to England in the spring following that in which he had left it, and went at once to Chislebridge. It was late afternoon when he drove, in a twilight like his own mood of meditative acceptance, to the well-known house. Ample and benignant it stood behind its walls and lawns and trees, and seemed to look upon him with eyes of unresentful patience.

He limped in and Gwendolen met him in the hall.

"My dear, dear Owen, how are you? Yes, I had your wire this morning. Good; I see that the journey has done you no harm. But you are tired, aren't you? Will you go to your own room or have tea with me at once? It's just been brought in."

He said that he would have tea with her. She did not actually help him up the stairs, but as, with skill impaired, he swung himself from step to step, the touch of her tactful and ready hand was upon his arm, a caress rather than a sustainment. Passing the hand through his arm, she led him into the drawing-room.

Owen looked about him. He stood for a long moment in the door and looked. He then allowed himself a cautious, side-long glance at Gwendolen. Her eyes, unaware in their bland complacency, had followed his and rested upon her room.

"Oh, yes, I'd forgotten that you hadn't seen my new drawing-room," she said. "We've had great changes."

Even in his horror, for it was hardly less, he was touched to realize that Gwendolen was thinking far less of her drawing-room than of him. She might have forgotten that it had

changed, had he not so helplessly displayed his amazement.

"Yes, indeed," he said. He limped to the fire and sank heavily into the deep, black satin easy-chair drawn before it. He leaned his elbow on his knee and rested his head on his hand, and as he did so he observed that before the fire stood a mahogany footstool with a bead-worked top.

"You are tired, dear Owen. Do you feel ill?" Gwendolen hovered above his chair.

"I do feel a little giddy," he confessed. "I'm not all right yet, I see."

He raised his head. It was to face the mantelpiece, with its oval, gilt mirror and crystal lustres and gilt-and-marble clock. No, there were not doves and a nest upon it. This was a finer clock than the one with the doves, and the lustres were larger, and the flowers that stood between were mauve orchids. Gwendolen always went astray over her flowers.

"Here is tea," she said, seating herself at a little mahogany table with bowed and decorated legs. "Of course you're bound to feel tired, dear Owen, after your journey. Tea will be the very thing for you."

He turned now a furtive eye along the wall. Flower-pieces, dim, flat, old flower-pieces and

arid steel-engravings and tall pieces of mahogany furniture with marble vases upon them—no mistakes had been made here, for if the vases were not urns, they were of marble and in their places.

"How do you like it in this phase?" Gwendolen asked him, tactfully turning from the question of his weakness. "I love it myself, I own, though of course Chislebridge thinks I've lost my wits. To tell you the truth, Owen, I was tired of beauty. One may come to that. One may feel," said Gwendolen, pouring out the tea, "that one needs a discipline. This room is my discipline, and after it I know that I shall find self-indulgence almost vulgar."

No; his mind was working to and fro between the present and the past with the rapidity and accuracy of a shuttle threading an intricate pattern—no, he had never mentioned to Gwendolen that late autumnal visit of his to Chislebridge eighteen months ago. Had that been because to mention it and the transformation he had been the first to witness in Mrs. Waterlow's drawing-room would have been, in a sense, to give Gwendolen a warning? And had he not, in his deepening affection for her, conceived her to be above the need of such

warnings? Yes; for though he had been glad to recover his ideal of young Mrs. Waterlow, though he had been more than willing that Gwendolen should occupy the slightly ridiculous and humiliating position that he had imagined to be Mrs. Waterlow's, he had never for a moment imagined that Gwendolen's disingenuous docility would go as far as this. So many people might love red lacquer and old glass with a clear conscience, once they had been brought to see them; but who, with a clear conscience, could love black satin furniture and marble vases?

"It is a very singular room," he found at last, in comment upon her information. "How —and when—did you come to think of it?" He heard the hollow sound of his own voice; but Gwendolen remained unaware. The fact of her stupidity cast a merciful veil of pitifulness over her.

"I hardly know," she said, handing him his tea and happy in her theme. "These things are in the air at a given time—reactions, repulsions, wearinesses—I think. It grew bit by bit; I've brought it to this state only since my return from the Riviera. The idea came to me, oh, long ago—long before your illness. Alec Chambers is perfectly entranced with it, and

vows it is the most beautiful—yes, beautiful—room in existence. It is witty as well as beautiful, he says, and he is going to paint it for the New English Art Club. Rooms have a curious influence upon me, you know, Owen. I really do feel," said Gwendolen busying herself hospitably with his little plate and hot, buttered toast, "that I've grown cleverer since living in this one."

Owen, while she talked and while he drank his tea, had been more frankly looking about him. Flagrant as was the plagiarism, Gwendolen, as before, had protected herself by a more illustrious achievement. It was a stately, not a staid room; it carried the idea higher, and thereby missed it. It was not an amusing room, nor witty, to any one who had seen the original. It was impressive, oppressive, almost forbidding. Gwendolen, for one thing, had had more space to fill. The naïveté of mere flower-pieces would not furnish her walls, and she had lapsed into sheer ugliness with the large and admirably accurate steel-engravings. Caution, too, had been mistakenly exercised here and there; the black satin furniture had no antimacassars and the centre-table no ornament except a vase of orchids and calf-bound books.

Owen felt no indignation; he would always remain too fond of Gwendolen, too tolerant of her folly, to feel indignant with her; it was with a mild but final irony that he brought his eyes back at last to his unconscious and hapless cousin. And he wondered how far Gwendolen had gone, how far she could be made to go. "There's only one thing that it lacks," he said. "Shall I tell you?"

"Oh, *do,*" she urged, beaming over her tea. "You know how much I value your taste."

"Oh, I haven't much taste," said Owen, "I've never gone in for having taste. And doesn't your room prove that taste is a mistake if indulged too far? It's more a sense of literary fitness I allude to. Yours is meant to be a soulless room, isn't it? That's your intention?"

"Exactly," said Gwendolen, with eager apprehension; "that is just it—a soulless room. One is sick of souls, just as one is sick of beauty."

"Exactly," Owen echoed her. "But, since you have here a travesty of beauty, what you need to complete your idea is a travesty of soul. You need a centre that draws it all into focus. You need something that, alas! you might have had, and have lost for ever. The white pagoda, Gwendolen, that Mrs. Waterlow found.

Your room needs that, and only that, to make it perfect."

He spoke in his flat, weak invalid's voice, but he was wondering, almost with ardour, if Gwendolen, this touchstone applied, would suspect or remember and, from penitence or caution, redeem herself by a confession. For a moment, only a moment, she looked at him very earnestly; and he was aware that he hoped that she was going to redeem herself—hoped it almost ardently, not for his own sake—those sober hopes were dead for ever—but for the sake of the past and what it had really held of fondness and sympathy and essential respect.

Gwendolen looked at him earnestly; it was as though a dim suspicion crossed her; and then, poor thing! she put it aside. Yes, he was very sorry for her as he listened to her.

"Owen, that is clever of you," she said, "but very, very clever. That is precisely what I've been saying to myself ever since the idea came to me. I can't forgive myself for that piece of stupidity—my only one, I will say, in regard to such recognitions and perceptions. I may be a stupid woman about a great many things, but I'm not stupid about rooms. The horror of Aunt Pickthorne's room dulled my eyes so that in all truth I can say that I never saw

that pagoda. And from the moment I've had my idea I've moaned—but literally moaned—over having lost it. Of course it is what the room needs, and all that it needs—the travesty of a soul standing on that mahogany table."

"Yes, the centre-table is the place for it," said Owen.

"It *is* clever of you to feel it just as I do, Owen, dear," she went on. "The pagoda was meant for this room and for this room only; for, you know, I didn't think Cicely Waterlow at all happily inspired in placing it as she had."

"As she had?" He rapped the question out with irrepressible quickness.

"Yes, among all that rather trashy lacquer and glass in that rather gimcrackery little drawing-room of hers. The pagoda looked there, what it had always looked in Aunt Pickthorne's room—a gimcrack itself."

"Looked?" he repeated. "How does it look now? How has she placed it now?"

And, for the first time in all their intercourse, he saw that Gwendolen was suddenly confused. He had hardly trapped her. She had set the trap herself, and inadvertently had walked into it. A faint colour rose to her cheek. She dropped for a moment her eyes upon the fire. Then, covering her self-consciousness with a

show of smiling vivacity, she knelt to poke the logs, saying:

"I don't know, I really don't know, Owen. Cicely is always changing her room, you know. She is very quick at feeling what's in the air—as quick as I am really—and I haven't seen her for ages. She has gone to live in London —oh, yes, didn't you know? Yes, she came into a little money over a year ago, and she and old Mrs. Waterlow have taken a house in Chelsea, and are coming back to Chislebridge only for two or three months in every year. They are very fond of Chislebridge. So I haven't an idea of what her drawing-room is like now."

"Perhaps it's like yours," Owen suggested. "The one I saw was rather like yours, I remember."

Gwendolen opened kind and repudiating eyes.

"Do you think so, Owen? Like mine? Oh, only in one or two superficial little things. She hadn't a Chinese screen or a lacquer cabinet or a piece of Chinese painting to bless herself with, poor little Cicely! No, indeed, Owen; I don't think it would be at all fair to say that Cicely copied me. These things are in the air."

* * * * * * *

Before he left Chislebridge he asked Gwendolen for Mrs. Waterlow's London address, and observed that she did not flinch in giving it to him. He inferred from this that Mrs. Waterlow's black satin suite had not left Chislebridge and that Gwendolen knew that she had nothing to fear from a London visit. Would she indeed fear anything from any visit? Her placid self-deception was so profound that it would be difficult to draw a line fairly between skilful fraud and instinctive self-protection. Gwendolen, without doubt, conceived herself completely protected. She would never suspect him of suspecting her.

He felt, when he got back to London, a certain reluctance in going to see Mrs. Waterlow. It was not only that he shrank from reading in old Mrs. Waterlow's malicious eyes the recognition of his discovery; in regard to young Mrs. Waterlow there was another shrinking that was almost one of shyness. She had been wronged, grossly wronged, by some one to whom he must show the semblance of loyalty, and the consciousness of her wrongs affected him deeply. A fortnight passed before he made his way one afternoon to Chelsea, a fortnight in which the main consciousness that filled his sense of renewal was that of his merciful

escape. Mrs. Waterlow's house was in St. Leonard's Terrace, one of the narrow, old houses that face the expanse of the Royal Hospital Gardens. The spring sun, as he limped along, was shining upon their façades—dull, old brick and dim, white paint—like slabs of ancient wedding-cake with frosted edging.

After all the expense of his illness, he was very poor in these days, and had come with difficulty in a 'bus. As he opened the gate and went into the flagged garden, where white tulips grew, he glanced up and saw young Mrs. Waterlow standing looking out at the drawing-room window. Her eyes met his in surprise, they had not seen each other for so long a time; then, as lifting his hat he smiled at her, he thought he saw in them a sudden pity and gravity. He did of course look so much more battered than when she had last seen him. The nice, middle-aged maid let him in—he was glad of that—and, as he followed her up the narrow staircase, with its white, panelled walls, he wondered which drawing-room it was to be, and felt his heart sink strangely at the thought that perhaps, after all, Mrs. Waterlow had transplanted her discipline to London.

But, no; like a soft gush of sunlight, like bells and clear, running water, the first room

greeted him in a medley of untraceable associations. It was the first room, with the delicate cane-seated chairs and settees, the red lacquer and the glass, all looking lovelier than ever against the panelled white, all brighter, sweeter, happier than in the rather dim room on the ground floor in Chislebridge. And touches of green, like tiny flakes of vivid flame, went through it in the leaves of the white azaleas that filled the jars and vases. He saw it all, and he saw, as Mrs. Waterlow came toward him, that the white pagoda stood on its former little black lacquer table in one of the windows.

Mrs. Waterlow shook his hand and her eyes examined him.

"You have been ill. I was so sorry to hear," she said.

"Yes, I've been wretchedly ill; for years now, it seems," he replied.

They sat down before the fire. Old Mrs. Waterlow, she told him, was away on a visit to Chislebridge, from which she was to return that evening at six o'clock. It was only four. He had two hours before him, and he felt that in them he was to be very happy. They talked and talked. He saw that she liked him and expected him to stay on and talk. All the magic and elation and sense of discovery and

adventure was with him as on their first encounter. She knew him, he found, so much better than he could have guessed. She had read everything he had written. She appreciated so finely; she even, with a further advance to acknowledged friendship, criticized, with the precision and delicacy expressed in all that she did. And the fact that she liked him so much, that she was already so much his friend, gave him his right to let her see how much he liked her. The two hours were not only happy; they were the happiest he had ever known.

The clock had hardly struck six when old Mrs. Waterlow's cab drove up.

"Don't go; mamma will so like to see you," said Mrs. Waterlow. "She so enjoyed that little visit you paid her over a year ago, you know."

This was the first reference that had been made to the visit. He wondered if she guessed what it had done for their friendship.

Old Mrs. Waterlow came in, wearing just such a delightful, flowing black satin cloak and deep black satin bonnet as he would have expected her to wear. And seeing him there with her daughter-in-law, she paused, as if arrested, on the threshold. Then, her eyes pass-

ing from the tea-table and its intimacy of grouping with the two chairs they had risen from, and resting brightly on her daughter's face, where she must read the reflection of his happiness, Owen saw that she cast off a scruple, came to a decision, and renewed the impulse that had brought her up the stairs, he now realised, at an uncharacteristic speed.

"My dear Cicely," she exclaimed, after she had greeted him, "you've lost your wager!"

Cicely Waterlow gazed at her for a moment and then she flushed deeply.

"Have I, mamma?" she said, busying herself with the kettle. "Well, that pleases you, and doesn't displease me. You'll want some tea, won't you?"

"Yes, indeed, I want some tea. But you'll not put me off with tea, my dear. I want to talk about my wager, too; and Mr. Stacpole will want to hear about it, for it was his wager as well. You did say that you felt convinced that I was safe in my haven, didn't you, Mr. Stacpole? Well, I've lost it, and I'm not at all pleased to have lost it. I'm triumphant, if you will, but savage, too. You'll forgive me, I know, Mr. Stacpole, if I'm savage with your cousin when I tell you that she has been inspired with a black satin suite and mahogany

furniture and bead-work since seeing Cicely's new drawing-room in Chislebridge."

"Mamma!" Cicely protested. "Two people can perfectly well have the same idea at the same time! There's no reason in the world why Gwendolen shouldn't feel just my fancy for funny, old, ugly things."

"She didn't show any fancy for them when she saw them a year ago, did she, dear?" said the intractable old lady, seating herself at the tea-table. "She was very guarded, very mute, though very observant. Yes; people may have the same idea, but they'll hardly have the same black satin furniture and the same beaded foot-stools, will they?"

Seeing the deep embarrassment in which his friend was plunged, Owen now interposed.

"Don't try to defend Gwendolen on my account," he said. "She really can't be defended. I know it, for I've seen her drawing-room."

"You have seen it? And what do you think of it?" asked old Mrs. Waterlow.

"I thought, as I told her," said Owen, "that it lacked but one thing, and that was the travesty of a soul. It lacked the white pagoda."

"You told her that? It was what she told me. She told me that she could not forgive herself for having parted with the pagoda, for

it was the travesty of a soul that her room still needed. 'You mean,' I said, 'the pagoda placed as Cicely placed it on the centre-table in her new room?' She gazed at me and laid her hand on my arm and asked: 'But, dear Mrs. Waterlow, how had Cicely placed the pagoda? I really don't remember. I really don't remember at all what Cicely's new room was like, except that it was mid-Victorian, and had old water-colours on the walls. Surely you don't think that I've copied Cicely?'

" 'My dear Mrs. Conyers,' I said to her, 'I don't think, but know, that you've done nothing else since you came to Chislebridge. But in this case you are farther from success than usual, for Cicely's drawing-room is gay, and yours is *grand sérieux.*' "

Mrs. Waterlow's bomb seemed to fill the air with a silvery explosion, and, as its echoes died, in the ensuing stillness, the eyes of Cicely and Owen met beneath the triumphant gaze of the merciless old lady. It was from his eyes that hers caught the infection. To remain grave now was to be *grand sérieux,* and helpless gaiety was in the air. Owen broke into peals of laughter.

"Oh—but—" Cicely Waterlow protested, laughing, too, but still flushed and almost tear-

ful—"it isn't fair. It's as if we had taken her in. She doesn't know she does it, really she doesn't; she is so well-meaning—so kind."

"She knows now," said old Mrs. Waterlow, who remained unsmiling, but with a placidity full of satisfaction; "and she'll hardly be able to forget."

"I'm quite sure," said Cicely, "that she really believes that she cares for the new drawing-room. People can persuade themselves so easily of new tastes. And why shouldn't they have them? I believe that Gwendolen does like it."

"Yes, she does indeed," said old Mrs. Waterlow. "She says so. She says she never cared for any room so much and that she intends to live and die with it. Her only refuge now is to go on faithfully loving it. So there she is, buttoned into her black satin for ever!"

. . . . . .

UNTIL now Mrs. Conyers has remained faithful, and her consistency is still made good to her; for none of her drawing-rooms has brought her such appreciation. Chislebridge has never dared to emulate it; Mr. Chambers and his friends have often painted it, and Mrs. Waterlow's original, like a gay jest, uttered and

then gone for ever, is no longer in existence to vex and perplex her with its mocking smile. Moreover, her own drawing-room no longer lacks its travesty of a soul. Owen married Cicely Waterlow in the autumn, and Gwendolen, magnanimous, and burning her bridges behind her, sent them for their wedding-present her two lovely and unique red lacquer cabinets. One stands in the front, and one in the back drawing-room in the little house in St. Leonard's Terrace, and Cicely said to Owen on the day they arrived that any wrong of the past, if wrong there had been, was now atoned for. And when they married and went round the world for their wedding-trip, they found in China a white pagoda, unflawed, larger, more sublimely elegant than the old one. This they brought back to Gwendolen, and with unfaltering courage she has placed it upon her mahogany centre table.

THE SUICIDE

THE SUICIDE

A COMEDY

SHE took the bottle from its wrappings and looked at it—at its apparent insignificance and the huge significance of the glaring word "Poison" printed across it. She looked resolutely, and as resolutely went with it to the other side of the room, and locked it away in the drawer of her dressing-table. She paused here, and her eyes met her mirrored eyes. The expression of her face arrested her attention. Did people who were going to die usually look so calm, so placid? Really, it was a sort of placidity that gazed back at her, so unlike the disfigured, tear-blinded reflection that had been there that morning—when she had read the paper. After the tempest of despair, the frozen decision, the nightmare securing of the means of death (if any one should guess! stop her!) it was indeed a sort of apathy that drenched her being, as if already the drug had

gone through it. The face in the mirror was very young and very helpless and very charming. It was like the face of a little wind-blown ghost, with its tossed-back hair and wide, empty, gazing eyes. The sweetness of the wasted cheeks and soft, parted lips suddenly smote on the apathy, and tears came. She pressed her hands over her eyes, struggled, and mastered herself again. Her own pathos must not unnerve, and her unbearable sorrow must nerve, her.

She looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. Just three. She could give herself ample time for writing the letter; then she must go and post it. Before five she would be back here—locked in her room. Before six—

She went to the writing-table, unlocked a drawer,—the key hung on a ribbon around her neck, under her bodice,—and took out a thick packet of closely written papers. Sitting there, hesitating a moment, she wondered if she would look back at those records of hope and suffering —more than a whole year of beautiful suffering, beautiful hope. The rising of tears again warned her that such a retrospect would make her more unfit for writing the last letter as it must be written—with full possession of her best and deepest meaning. She must be her

most courageous self to write now. The writer of those past records seemed a little sister half playing with her grief, beside the self that sat here now, stricken and determined.

Drawing pen and paper to her, she wrote:

My Dearest—My best Beloved: This is the last of the letters. I am going to send them all to you now, so that you may know all. I read this morning in the paper that you were to be married. And now there is nothing left for me but to die. When you read this I shall be dead.

You must not blame me, or think me too cowardly. I am a fragile person, I know, and my life hung on you. Without hope it can't go on; it's too feeble to find anything else to live for. And you could never, never blame yourself. How could you have helped it? How could you have dreamed that I loved you? If you had you could have done nothing but be sorry—and irked. But it comforts me in dying to let you know how I have loved you; it is like a dying gift I make you,—do you see?—all the love that I have hidden. If I had lived I could never have made the gift. Had you guessed, or had I told you, it would have been a burden, a ludicrous burden. But as you read this, knowing that I am dead, my love must come to you as a blessing; you must feel it as something, in its little way beautiful, and care for it; for any love that only gives and makes no claim is beautiful, is it not?

I think I find dying so much easier than living because in dying I can give you the gift.

All these letters, written from the first day I met you, almost a year and a half ago, will tell you step by step what I have felt. Don't let the hopes that flickered up sometimes hurt you; the strength of my feeling made the flame, nothing that you ever said or did.

How I remember that first day, in the country, at the Ashwells', when mamma and I came on to the lawn where you were all sitting, and mamma laughed at me for stumbling over a chair—and you smiled at me. From the moment I saw you then, I loved you. You were like some dream come true. You never knew what joy it gave me (only joy; the pain was in not being with you) when we walked together and talked; the letters will tell you that. But to-day it all comes back, even the little things that I hardly knew I was seeing or hearing—the late white roses in the garden; and the robin sitting on the garden wall (we stopped to look at it, and it sat still, looking at us: I wonder if you remember the robin); and the distant song some labourers were singing in the fields far away.

And here in London, the dinners we met at, the teas you came to, the one or two books you gave me and that we wrote about—what I felt about it all, these meteors through my gray life, I have written it all down. Did I not act well? You could never have guessed, under my composure and cheerful-

ness, could you? I am a little proud of myself when I think of it.

And that this is no sudden rocking of my reason you will see, too, from the growing hopelessness, of emptiness in the last months, when I have not seen you. In the bottom of my heart I had always the little hope that some day I might give you these myself, that we might read them together, you and I, smiling over my past sorrow. And if I had died, and you had not loved me, you were to have had them, as I told you, for I wanted to give you my love; I could not bear that it should go out and that you should never know.

I wish that I could have died, and need not have killed myself; I am so afraid that that may give you pain, though it ought not to, if you think justly of it all.

Of course you will be sorry for me—I am afraid that I want you to be *sorry;* but don't be too sad. I am so much happier in dying than I could have been in living; and in loving you I have felt so much, I have lived so much—more perhaps than many people in a whole lifetime.

See the gift you have given *me,* dearest one. Good-bye. Good-bye.

ALLIDA.

It was over,—the last link with life, her last word spoken or written,—and the echo of it seemed to come to her already as across a great

abyss that separated her from the world of the living.

With the signing of her name she had drawn the shroud over her face.

Only the mechanical things now remained to be done: dying was really over; she really was dead.

She wrapped this last letter around all the others, kissed it, and sealed it in a large envelope; then, putting on her hat and coat and holding the letter in her ulster pocket, she left her room and went down the stairs.

The house was a typically smart, flimsy London house, of the cheaper Mayfair sort—a narrow box set on end and fitted with chintz and gilt and white mouldings; a trap to Allida's imagination—an imagination that no longer shrank from the contemplation of the facts of her life; for they, too, were seen from across that abyss.

In the drawing-room, among shaded lamps, cushions, and swarming bric-à-brac, her mother had flirted and allured—unsuccessfully—for how many years? She had felt, since the time when, as a very little girl, she had gone by the room every day coming in from her walk at tea-time with her governess, and heard inside the high, smiling, artificial voice, with its odd

appealing quality, its vague, waiting pauses, the shrinking from her mother and her mother's aims. Later on the aims had been for her, too, and their determination had been partly, Allida felt, hardened by the fact of a grown-up daughter being such a deterrent—so in the way of a desperate, fading beauty who had never made the brilliant match she hoped for. That she had never, either, made even a moderate match for her, Allida, the girl felt, with a firmer closing of her hand on the letter, she perhaps owed to *him*. What might her weakness and her hatred of her home not have urged her into had not that ideal—that seen and recognized ideal—armed her? The vision of old Captain Defflin, his bruised-plum face and tight, pale eyes, rose before her, and the vacuous, unwholesome countenance of young Sir Alfred Cutts. How often had she been dexterously left alone with them in the drawing-room! Thank God! all that was far, far behind her. Death was dignified, sweet-smelling in its peace, when she thought of all that the gilt-and-chintz drawing-room stood for in her memories. Death was sweet when life was so ugly.

Now she was in the street, the door closed behind her, and no servant had seen her.

It was a foggy afternoon, and the soiled white

houses opposite were dim. A thin, stray cat rubbed against the area railings and mewed as Allida stood, pausing for a moment, on the steps.

Which was the nearest pillar-box? At the end of the street, just round the corner. The plaintive, nasal cry of the cat caught her attention. Poor creature! She ought to spare some poison for it. The irony of the idea almost made her smile as she stooped and patted the dingy head. The cat, leaning like a ship in a stiff wind, walked to and fro across her dress, looking up at her as it still plaintively, interrogatively mewed. Its appeal put aside for a moment the decision as to which pillar-box. She picked up the cat and returned to the door. The maid answered her ring.

Allida was a little sorry that she must speak once more, after all, on this mundane plane. The finish of her tragedy seemed slightly marred by this episode. But she heard her calm voice telling the maid to feed the cat—"And keep it until you can find a home for it. Cook won't mind, will she?"

"Oh, no, miss; cook is fond of cats. Poor thing, then," said the maid, who was tender of heart.

Again the door was shut, and again the

pillar-box was the last act but one of her drama.

She walked swiftly down the street, thinking, oddly, more about the cat than about her destination or the letter she held clutched in her pocket. The stripes on the cat's head, its rough, sooty fur, the sharp projection of its backbone and the grotesque grimace of its mew —her mind dwelt on these trivial details; and under all was a funny added contentment at this further proof of the mercilessness and ugliness of the world she was leaving.

The corner of the street was reached and turned. There, in the fog, stood the red shaft of the pillar-box. Beyond it a street lamp, already lighted, made a blur of light in the thick air and cast upward a long cone of shadow.

Allida's heart suddenly shrank and shuddered.

The lamp and the pillar-box looked horrible. Death was horrible. To see him no more was horrible. She felt only horror as mechanically she took out the letter and dropped it into the box.

The heavy sound of its fall turned her shuddering heart to ice.

She had felt horror, she had been prepared for horror, but not for such horror as this.

It would all be like this now, she knew, until the end. Let her hurry through it, then; let her escape quickly; and, at all events, her own room, her familiar little room, with its fire, its books, its quiet white bed, would be a refuge after this terrible, empty street. She thought only of her room,—the thought blotting out what would happen in it,—knowing only that she longed to be there, with a longing like a wounded child's for its mother's arms. And yet she still stood staring at the slit in the pillar-box.

"Miss Fraser," a voice said beside her.

It was a voice of carefully quiet greeting, guarded interrogation, guarded expostulation.

She looked up, feeling something shatter in her, fearing that she was going to faint. It was almost like the crash of death and like a swooning into a new consciousness. She only dimly, through the swooning sense of change, recognized the face that looked at her, smiling, but so puzzled, so pained—so pained that she guessed that her own face must show some strange terror.

She had seen the face, in the chintz-and-gilt drawing-room,—it had seemed out of place there,—she had seen it often; but memory was blurred. Had he not taken her down to din-

ner somewhere only the other day? Yes; she knew him well; only she was dead, a ghost, and reality, familiar reality, looked different.

"Mr. Haldicott," she said, putting out her hand. Her voice was normal—she heard that; she felt that she could almost have smiled. Yet something was fearfully shattered, some power in herself that had directed her so resolutely till now. The cat had been disconcerting, but the appearance of this man, whom she knew quite well, who might talk, might question her, might walk back beside her, seemed fatally disconcerting. For could she act? Could she still speak on normally? And further delay, now that every link was broken, now that to all real intents and purposes she was dead, was a torture too fearful to be contemplated. Yet how evade it? She felt that her hand, which he still held, held very tightly, was trembling.

"You are ill," he said.

She shook her head.

"No; not at all. I only came out for a little walk. And I must go back to tea."

"Your mother is at home?"

"No; she is out of town. She doesn't get back till to-morrow."

"You are going to have tea all alone?"

Allida gazed at him. How should she evade him if he offered to come back?

"I haven't had my walk yet. I came out for a little walk," she repeated.

By the blurred light of the street lamp he still looked at her, still held her trembling hand. His face showed his perplexed indecision. Suddenly he drew the hand within his arm.

"Let us have the little walk, then," he said, "only you must let me come with you. You are in some great trouble. Don't bother to deny it. Don't say anything. Your face showed me that something dreadful was happening to you. Don't speak—I saw it as I was passing on the other side of the street. The lamp was just lighted, else I shouldn't have recognised you. Now walk quietly on like this. Don't even think. I'm not a meddling idiot; I know I'm not. You are desperate about something, and anything, any one, even a complete stranger, and I'm not that, who steps in between desperation and an act is justified—perhaps a Godsend."

He was walking beside her, half leading her, talking quickly, as if to give her time to recover, and glancing at her stricken, helpless face.

As they walked they heard behind them the

rattling fall of letters into a postman's bag; the pillar-box had been emptied.

The youth of the face, its essential childishness, the web of soft hair that hung disarranged over her cheek, made her look like a very little girl, and was in strange contrast with the look of terror.

They walked on and on, down streets, across wide, phantasmal squares.

Haldicott held the hand on his arm,—he did not speak,—and Allida felt herself moving with him through the fog like an Eurydice led by Orpheus, a shade among the shades. And all the while there hovered before her thoughts the vision of that quiet room, that white bed, still waiting for her. Suddenly she broke into sobs. She stopped. She leaned helplessly against his arm.

"Good heavens! you will tell me now," Haldicott exclaimed. "Cross the road here. Lean on me. We will go into the park. No one can see you."

She stumbled on blindly beside him, both hands clutching his arm.

All she knew was that she had left life behind her, and yet that she must go back to that room, and that the room now was more horrible than the pillar-box had been. She

had left life behind her, and yet she still clung to it—here beside her. Life! life! warm, kind life!

In the park he led her into a deserted path. A bench stood beneath a tall, leafless tree, its branches stencilled flatly on the yellow-gray fog. Haldicott and Allida sat down side by side.

"Now tell me. You can trust me utterly. Tell me everything," said Haldicott.

His fine face, all competence and mastery, studied hers, its shattered loveliness. She leaned her head back against the bench. Life was there, and a great peace seemed to flow through her as the mere consciousness of its presence filled her. As long as he held her hand she could not be frightened; and since she was only a ghost, since all her past seemed to have dropped from her, she could look at it with him, she could tell him what he asked. As if exhausted, borne along by his will, she said, "I am going to commit suicide."

Haldicott made no ejaculation and no movement. Her eyes were closed, and he studied her face. Its innocent charm almost made him smile at her words; and yet the expression he had seen from across the street, as she dropped that letter into the box and stood

frozen, had gone too well with such words. He reflected silently. He had long known Allida Fraser, never more than slightly; and yet from the frequency of slight knowledge he found that he had accumulated, quite unconsciously, an impression of her, distinct, sweet, appealing. He saw her, silent and gentle, in her tawdry mother's tawdry house; he heard her grave quiet voice. He had thought her, not knowing that he thought at all, charming. He had always been glad to talk to her, to make her gravity, the little air of chill composure that he had so understood, and liked, in the daughter of a desperate, faded flirt, warm into confident interest and smiles. Thinking of that quiet voice, that gentle smile, the poise and dignity of all the little personality, he could not connect them with hysterical shallowness. But he had, he now recognized, thought of her as older, more tempered to reality. There was a revelation of desperate youth, and youth's sense of the finality of desperation, on her face; and, with all the rigid resolve he had seen, he could guess in it youth's essential fluidity. She was resolved, and yet all resolves in a soul so young were only moods, unless circumstances let them stand still, stagnate, and finally freeze. She was not frozen yet. It

was only a mood standing still; shake it, and it would fluctuate into surprising changes. Allida opened her eyes while he reflected, and many moments had gone by since her words.

"How amazing that I should tell you, calmly tell you, isn't it?" she said. "And yet I can't feel it as amazing. Nothing could amaze me. I seem to have passed beyond any feeling of that sort. But since I am so really dead already, that I can tell you, you must respect my confidence in you. You must not try to prevent me. I trust you."

"I shan't prevent you," said Haldicott.

Again she closed her eyes. "Thanks. It is almost a comfort to be able to tell some one. I know now how fearfully lonely I have been. And yet—I wish I hadn't met you—or I will wish it. Now I can wish nothing, and feel nothing—except that you are there, alive, and that I am going to die. But it will be harder to do now. Everything seems so vague, everything seems left behind. The very sorrow that makes me do it seems so far away—like a dream. I can't go through all the realization again, and when I do it now, it will seem to be for something unreal." Her voice trailed off.

"Are you sure you are going to do it?" Haldicott asked presently.

They spoke very slowly, with long pauses, as though a monotony of leisure were about them; as though, in some quiet, dim place of departed spirits, time had ceased.

"Yes; quite sure. I have bought it—the poison—I had a doctor's prescription—I have thought it all out carefully. It's in the top drawer of my dressing-table."

She would, he saw, tell him everything.

Again he paused.

"Is it an irremediable sorrow that makes life impossible, or is it life itself, in general, that you can't go on with?"

"Both—both," said Allida.

Again a long, long silence grew; every moment, Haldicott felt, a drop in the deep cup of oblivion that, unconsciously, she was drinking, that would make the past more and more unreal, until from oblivion she woke into the sane world of struggle and life.

"Yet you are so young," he said at last, "with everything before you—real joys as well as—forgive me!—realer sorrows; they would balance better if you would live a little longer. You know, if you waited for just one year, let us say, you would look back with wonder

at this, with thankfulness that you hadn't."

"Perhaps," she said. "Only I don't want to live that year."

"And when were—when are you going to do it?"

"This evening. I had meant to do it long before this. Mamma is away. There could be no better time. Besides, it must be this evening. I've written."

"To her? To tell her?"

"No," Allida answered; "not to her." And she added, "I don't love her."

"Your mother?"

"This is my dying confession, so I will say the truth. No, I don't love her. She has made me so unhappy—made life so ugly."

"Then you wrote to some one whom you do love?"

"Yes," said Allida, after another pause. Her hat had loosened as she leaned her head back, and her disordered hair was about her face; she still kept her eyes closed with her expression of weary abandonment to the peace of confession.

He looked at her keenly, with most intent interest, most intent pity, and yet with a flicker of amusement in the look. She could do it. He believed her. Yet it would be as absurd as

it would be tragic if she did. It wasn't a face made for tragedy; it had strayed into it by mistake.

"This some one you love," he said gently, "will it not hurt them terribly? Have you thought of that?"

He saw the tears come. They rolled slowly down her cheeks. She faintly whispered:

"He doesn't love me."

Haldicott could feel no amusement now, the pity was too great. He put his other hand on the hand he held.

"Used he to love you?" he asked.

"No," said Allida; "he never loved me."

For a moment Haldicott struggled with a half-nervous wish to laugh; relief was in the wish.

"And he knows that you love him?" he controlled his voice to ask.

"He will—when he gets my letter."

"Poor devil!" ejaculated Haldicott.

"Oh, you don't understand!" cried Allida. She opened her eyes and sat upright, drawing her hand from his. "How could you understand? You think it's a sort of vengeance I'm taking—for his not loving me. I can't drag myself through explanations, indeed I can't. Of course I see that my tragedy to you must be

almost farce. I must go. Why should I have told you anything? I am desecrating it all, making it all grotesque, by being still alive."

"No, no; you mustn't go yet," said Haldicott, seizing her hand firmly, yet with not too obvious a restraint. "You mustn't go, not at peace with me. You have all the evening still before you,—it's not six yet,—and it doesn't take long to kill one's self with poison. Trust me. You must trust me. Don't think about its being grotesque; most things are in certain aspects. I think that we are both behaving very naturally, considering the circumstances. The circumstances, I grant you, are a little grotesque—not the circumstance of your being still alive, but of your wishing to die. But, indeed, I shall understand, you poor child, poor sweet child, if you will explain."

Again the mirage sense of compulsion, of peace in yielding to it, of letting this ghost-like consciousness shut out the long past and the short future, crept over her. She sank back again beside him.

"But how can I explain? Where shall I begin?"

"Listen to me now, dear Allida—we can use Christian names, I think, in a case of last dying confession like this. I am not going to pre-

vent you, or put any constraint upon you; but I want you to explain as clearly and fully as you can, so that, in trying to make me see, you may see yourself, clearly and fully, what you are doing, where you are. Probably you are in a condition of absolutely irrational despair. Let us look at it together. I may be able to show you something else. Begin with him. Who is he?"

Allida had leaned forward, her elbows on her knees. She dropped her face into her hands as she answered:

"Oliver Ainslie."

"Yes; I know him."

"Yes; you know him."

"He is—a charming fellow," said Haldicott.

"I met him over a year ago," said Allida. "I am very miserable at home. I have grown up alone. My mother and I have never been at all sympathetic. I hardly saw her when I was growing up. She only wanted to marry me off as soon as possible, and—she hasn't found it easy to marry me off. I haven't money—or looks in particular—oh, but I can't go into all that! You know mamma. I have hated my life with her."

"Yes, yes. I understand."

"Not that there is any harm in mamma,"

Allida amended, with a weary exactitude; "everybody understands that, too. Only she is so utterly silly, so utterly selfish. This all sounds horrible."

"I understand."

"I met him. I had never seen any one so dear, so sympathetic. I seemed to breathe with happiness when he was there. It was like morning sunlight after a hot, glaring ball-room, being with him. He never cared one bit for me; but—the first time I saw him he smiled at me, and he was kind and dear to me,—as he would be to any one,— and from that first moment I loved him—oh, loved him!"

She paused, a sacred sweetness in the pause.

Haldicott, sitting beside her in the fog, felt the presence of something radiant and snowy.

"And I sometimes thought and hoped—that he would care for me. I wrote to him all the time, letters I never sent; but I wrote as if he were to see them—some day. It's almost strange to me to think that such love didn't bring him to me by its very force and yearning. One hears, you know, of thoughts making themselves felt—becoming realities. I wonder where all those thoughts of mine went!"

He saw them all—those white, innocent thoughts—flying out like birds, like a flock of white birds, and disappearing in the darkness. How could a soul not have felt them fluttering about it, crying vainly for admittance? He almost shared Allida's wonder.

"And to-day, I sent all the letters with the last one telling of my death. For—I saw it this morning—he is engaged. So I couldn't go on. I could never love any one else; I shouldn't want to. My heart broke when I read the paper; really it broke. And I explained it all to him, so that it could not hurt him, that I was dying because life had become worthless to me—and yet that there was joy in dying because I could, in dying, tell him. There had been beauty and joy in loving him; he must not be too sorry; and he must care for my love. It was a gift—a gift that I could give him only in going away for ever myself."

She was silent. The evening was late by now, and the fog about them shut them into a little space, a little island just large enough for their bench, a bit of path, a dim border of railing opposite, and a branch of tree overhead. The muffled sound of cautious traffic was far away. They were wonderfully alone.

Haldicott took one of the hands on which she leaned, and raised it to his lips.

"Sweet, foolish child!" he said.

She turned her head and looked at him; it was almost as if she saw him for the first time —the man, not only Life's personification. They could still see quite clearly each other's faces, and for a long time, gravely, they looked into each other's eyes.

"Don't you see that it's all a dream?" said Haldicott.

"A dream?" Allida repeated. "The reality of a whole year?"

And yet it was a dream to her; even while she had told him of that year it was as if she told of something far behind her, lived through long, long ages ago, in another, a different life.

But she struggled to hold the vanishing pain and beauty of it all—the reality that, unreal, would make her whole being seem like a little handful of thin cloud dying away into emptiness.

"This is a dream," she said, still looking at him, *"this, this.* What am I doing here?" She rose to her feet, gasping now. "Oh! he will get the letter—and I shall not be dead! I must go at once—at once!"

"To save yourself from being ridiculous?

You are going to kill yourself so as to keep a tragic attitude that you've taken before this man who doesn't care for you—an attitude that's really disarranged? Dear—pitiful—enchanting little idiot!" said Haldicott.

He had risen too, and, holding her hands, he still, but not too obviously, kept her near him.

His words were almost cruel in their lightness; his voice had a feeling that, more than any words, any supplication or remonstrance, made her past life seem illusory, and she herself, with it, disappearing into pure nothingness. The world rocked with her. Only the feeling in that voice seemed real.

"Are you sure, are you sure," he said, "that you can never love anybody else? Won't you wait a year to find out? Won't you wait a month? Allida, won't you wait a day?"

"Why do you try to humiliate me?" she gasped, and the tears fell down her face. He almost feared that he had been brutal, that she was going to faint.

"I am not trying to humiliate you. I am trying to wake you. Perhaps the truth will wake you. Will you wait a day, an hour, Allida, and see?"

"See what?"

"That this is a dream; that you wove it out

of nothing to fill the emptiness of your sad life; that it would have gathered round the first 'dear sympathetic' person who smiled at you. And after you see that, will you wait and see ——" he paused.

"What?" she repeated.

"How much I can make you love me," said Haldicott.

"Why do you mock me?" Allida said. "Why, unless you think me mad?"

"Well, of course you *are* mad, in a sense; any coroner's inquest would say so. But *mock* you! I love you, Allida."

Her face had now as wild, as frozen a look on it as the one he had seen, not three hours before, after she had slipped the letter into the pillar-box; but it was with another wildness—of wonder rather than of despair.

"But how can you?" she faltered.

"I can tell you how, but you must wait an hour—more than an hour—to hear. You will wait—Allida?"

"It is pity, to save me."

"To save you? Why, I'd hand you over to the nearest policeman if I only wanted to save you. I *do* want to save you—for myself."

There drifted through her mind a vision of her little room, where, by this time, she might

have been lying on the bed, the empty bottle of poison near her. And that vision of death was now far away, across an abyss, and she was in life, and life held her, claimed her.

"But I can't understand. How is it possible?" She closed her eyes. "My letter," she whispered.

Haldicott put his arm around her and led her down the path.

"Ainslie is a dear fellow," he said. "We will write him another letter as soon as we get in."

She was hardly aware of the walk back to the little house in Mayfair, back to the doorstep where, such aeons ago, she had paused to look at the crying cat. If she had not paused, if she had gone a little earlier to the pillar-box, before the lamp was lighted—— Her mind was blurred again. All—all was dream, except that life, near her, was claiming her.

Now they were in the drawing-room, among the shaded lamps, the gilt, the chintz and bric-à-brac.

Haldicott sent for wine and made her drink. He said to the maid that Miss Fraser had felt faint during her walk. For a long time Allida leaned back in the chair where he had put her, shading her eyes with her hand.

"Can you write to Ainslie now?" Haldicott asked at last. "We will send your letter by special messenger."

"Yes, yes; let me write." She drew off her gloves, and Haldicott put paper and pen before her.

She looked up at him.

"What shall I say?" she asked.

This time, uncontrollably, he wanted to laugh; if he did not laugh he must burst out crying; he leaned his elbows on the table as he sat beside her, burying his face on his arms, his shoulders shaking.

Allida sat with the pen in her hand, gazing at him. The nightmare, after all, was too near for her to share his dubious amusement; but that she saw its point as well as he did was evinced in her next question, asked in still the faltering voice:

"Shall I say that I've decided to wait a day?"

Haldicott looked up.

"Thank Heaven, you *have* a sense of humour. It was my one anxiety about you—all through. Say, dearest Allida, that you are awake."

She looked at him, and now, though she did not smile, her wan face was touched by a pale, responsive radiance.

"It is so strange—to be awake," she murmured, bending to her paper.

But hardly had the first slow line been written when running steps were heard outside, the door was flung open before the amazed maid could reach it, and Oliver Ainslie, white and distraught, darted into the room.

. . . . . .

He did not glance at Haldicott. The distraction of his look had only time to break into stupefied thanksgiving before the same rush that had brought him in carried him to Allida. He fell on his knees before her. Clasping her round the waist, he hid his face, crying, "Thank God!"

Allida sat, still holding her pen. She did not look at Ainslie, but across the room at Haldicott, and again, before her look, as of one confronted with her own utter inadequacy to deal with the situation, Haldicott could almost have laughed. But the moment for light interpretations had gone. Anything amusing in the present situation was only grimly so for him. The fairy prince had turned up—a real fairy prince, for a wonder, and three hours of everyday reality had no chance of counting against a year of fairy-tale with such a last

chapter. After all, it was very beautiful; he was able to see that, thank goodness! Yet Allida's perfectly blank look held him. She was evidently unable to deal single-handed with her dilemma—to explain to her fairy prince why he found her alive rather than dead. Haldicott turned to the mantelpiece and moved, unseeingly, the idiotic silver ornaments upon it, waiting for an opportunity to strike a blow for her deliverance.

Ainslie had lifted his face to hers.

"It was a mistake, that announcement: it's my cousin who is to be married; we have the same name. Oh, Allida! darling Allida! if I had not come in time! That I should have found you—*you!* And only just in time!"

He became now, perhaps from the blankness of her face, aware more fully of Haldicott's unobtrusive presence.

To the silent query of his eyes she answered:

"He knows—everything."

"He prevented you! He met you and prevented you! I see it all. Haldicott, it *is* you, isn't it——"

Haldicott reluctantly turned to him.

"My dear fellow, can I ever thank you enough? My dear Haldicott, it's all too astonishing. You know? And *why* she was go-

ing to? The poor, darling child!" He had risen, and, with his arm around Allida's shoulders, was gazing at her.

"I saw Miss Fraser posting her letter to you, and guessed from her expression that something very bad was up," said Haldicott. "I forced her to walk a little with me, and I made her tell me the story; and then I made her see that the truer love for you would be shown in living. She had just recognised that,"—Haldicott smiled at her,—"and she was going to write, and see if she couldn't waylay that letter—spare you the pain of it and, at all events, tell you that she wasn't going to burden you with unfair remorse for the rest of your days. That's about the truth of it all, isn't it?" And he so believed it to be, now, the only essential truth, or, at least, the half-truth that she had better believe in, that his smile had not a touch of bitterness.

Allida still held her pen and still gazed at him.

"Ah! thank God for it all—for the fact that the letter wasn't waylaid, and for the fact that you *were,* Allida! When I think of it—that gift coming to me—your gift, Allida—and not too late—not too late!"

The young man, in his rapturous thankful-

ness, indifferent to the guardian presence, raised her hand to his lips, kissing it with a fervour where tears struggled with smiles.

"I'll go now," Haldicott said gently. "I'm so—immensely glad for you both."

But Allida, at this, started from her helpless apathy.

"No, no! Don't—don't go!" she cried. "I can't think. It's all so impossible. Do you mean," and her eyes now went to Ainslie while she drew her hand from his—"do you mean that you love me?"

"Love you, darling Allida? Don't you see it?"

"Because you got the letter," Allida said, as if linking in her mind a chain of evidence. "If you hadn't got it—you would not love me now."

"Forgive me, dearest, for my blindness! I should not have known you if I had not got it."

Allida still looked at him.

"You are just as dear—even dearer than I thought you; you are even more worthy of any love than I dreamed," she said. Her face had lost all apathy, all helplessness. It was with the stricken resolution that it could so strangely show that she pushed back her chair and rose,

moving away from the young man, who, enchantingly a fairy prince, gazed at her with adoring eyes.

"It was written in a dream," said Allida, clasping her hands and returning his gaze. "It was written in a dream," she repeated. "It was all—all the whole year—a dream—only a dream."

The trust of his gaze was too deep for understanding to sink through it.

"I am awake now," said Allida; "you are dearer than I ever dreamed, but I am awake."

"When reality comes, the past always seems rather dream-like," Ainslie said. He felt and understood as well, as truly as the other had done. "Darling Allida, I can never be worthy of such a love as yours, but I will try. And now that you are awake, you will find how much better waking is than any dream."

She gasped at this, and retreated before him.

"But I am horrid; I am unbelievable. There isn't any reality. There isn't any love to be worthy of," she cried, and covered her face with her hands.

Ainslie, from her attitude of avowal and abasement, looked his stupefaction at Haldicott, and, for all answer, got a stupefaction as complete.

"What *does* she mean?" the younger man at length inquired.

"I don't think she knows what she means," Haldicott answered. "I think she is, naturally, overwrought. All feeling, all meaning, is paralyzed. She probably won't mean anything worth listening to for a good while."

They were speaking quite as if Allida, standing there with her hidden face, were a lunatic, the diagnosis of whose harmless case was as yet impossible in the absence of fresh symptoms. But a symptom was forthcoming.

"I mean *that*," she said. "I don't understand. I can't explain. It's as if something were broken in me. There isn't any love; there never will be. If you can ever forgive me, please tell me so—when you do. It mustn't be more than a dream for you, too—a dream only an hour long."

The two men again exchanged glances, but now with more hesitation.

"But, Allida,"—Ainslie spoke with gentle pain—"I love you. I am not dreaming. Do you mean to say that you can't love me? Do you mean to say that if I had loved you, with no letter to awaken me, you would have thought your love a dream, merely because it was answered?"

"It isn't that. I can't explain. Something broke. You came too late. It's as if I had died—and become almost another person. I know it's unbelievable; I don't understand it myself; but it is true. It is all over, really."

"All over?" dazedly Ainslie repeated. "But why? After those letters? After what you were going to do? Allida!"

She dropped her hands, and once more her eyes went to Haldicott in that look—the appeal of incompetence. But there was more in it: suffering and shame, and a strength that strove to hide them from him.

"Perhaps, my dear Ainslie, you had better go," said Haldicott, "for the present at least." But, in its wonder, his answering look now appealed and was helpless in its incomprehension.

Ainslie stared at her.

"Good-bye," he said at last.

"Oh, good-bye," said Allida, with a fervor of relief that all her humility and pity could not dissemble.

"Good-bye," he repeated, holding her hand, "sweet, strange, cruel Allida."

She put her hand over his and looked clearly at him.

"Remember," she said—"remember how absurd I am."

He was gone. Allida did not turn to Haldicott. She remained looking at the door that had closed on the exit of her "best beloved."

"But *why?*" said Haldicott. He repeated Ainslie's broken words almost faintly. "When the dream came true—why didn't you take it?"

She made no reply.

"I never meant that because it had been a dream it couldn't become a reality," he went on.

She looked vaguely round the room. Indeed, things swam to her; the nearest support was the mantelpiece. She leaned against it, looking down.

"It's not anything I said—in my efforts to shake you awake? You *were* in love with him, you know. Weren't you in love with him, Allida?"

"Yes; I suppose so. How can I tell you anything? All I know is that I was dreaming."

"But—why did the dream go?"

"You killed it, perhaps," she said in a colourless voice, leaning her forehead upon her hand, and still looking fixedly down.

"I—*I* killed it? You mean—that any one who had come then—would have stopped you

—made you see your own folly—waked you?"

"They might have stopped me—they might have saved me," she said, and she paused.

"But only I could wake you? Only I could prevent the coming true of your dream?" Again in his wondering, groping voice was the feeling that, like a torch, had led her up from Tartarus—up through blackness to the sweet air again.

She still hid her eyes, not daring to look or trust.

"Allida!" he supplicated.

"Oh," she said in a voice so low that it did not shake—it was as if she just dared to let it sound at all—"was your dream true, or was it only the rope you threw out to me to drag me on shore with?"

Haldicott stretched out his hand to her.

"Do you mean that my three hours of reality count for more than his—than his, backed by your whole year of dreaming? Allida, are you really absurd enough to say that I count for more than Oliver Ainslie?"

She put her weary, ashamed head down on the arm that leaned upon the mantelpiece. She did not take his hand.

"What can I say? Everything I say seems unbelievable. Can anything I say be more

absurd than anything else? Yes, you do count for more. You count for everything. Did I love him—or did I only love love? I don't know. I only know that what you said—and are—made it all a dream. And now you will think that I am going to kill myself because *you* don't love me! But my absurdity is over, I promise you. Really, I am awake."

"Allida, darling," said Haldicott—he went to her and took both her hands, so that she must raise her head and look at him—"if I've made fun of you when I was feeling horribly frightened, and called you ridiculous when I found you as tragic and adorable as you were grotesque, *that* was the rope. Now I will take an hour, or a day, or a whole week, if necessary, to make you believe it; but *I* could have committed suicide—I assure you I could—when I saw Oliver Ainslie come into the room."

A FORSAKEN TEMPLE

A FORSAKEN TEMPLE

CHAPTER I

MILLY

"IT is the emptiness, the loneliness, the lack of response and understanding," said Milly. "It is as if I were always looking at a face that never really saw me or spoke to me. Such a mistake as I have made—or as others have made for me—is irretrievable. An unhappy marriage seems to ruin everything in you and about you, and you have to go on living among the ruins. You can't go away and leave them behind you, as you can other calamities in life."

Milly Quentyn and Mrs. Drent were alone this afternoon in the country-house where they had come really to know each other, and Milly, acting hostess for her absent cousin, had poured out Mrs. Drent's tea and then her own, leaving it untouched, however,

while she spoke, her hands falling, clasped together, in her lap, her eyes fived on vacancy. The contemplation of ruins for the last five years had filled these eyes with a pensive resignation; but they showed no tearful repinings, no fretful restlessness. They were clear eyes, large and luminous, and in looking at them and at the wan, lovely little face where they bloomed like melancholy flowers, Mrs. Drent's face, on the other side of the tea-table, grew yet more sombre and more intent in its brooding sympathy. "Why did you——" she began, and then changed the first intention of her question to—"Why did you—love him?" This was more penetrating than to ask Mrs. Quentyn why she had married him.

The extreme lowness of Mrs. Drent's voice muffled, as it were, its essential harshness; one felt in it the effort to be soft, as in her one felt effort, always, to quell some latent fierceness, an eager, almost savage energy. She was thirty years old, six years older than Milly Quentyn. Her skin was swarthy, her eyes, under broad, tragically bent eyebrows, were impenetrably black. Her features, had they not been so small, so finely finished, would have seemed too emphatic, significant as they were of a race-horse nervousness and of something inflexible

in the midst of an expression all flexibility. Her hands were curiously slight and small, and as she now, in looking at her companion and in asking her question, locked them together with a force that made them tremble, they showed the same combination of an excessive strength informing an excessive fragility.

Milly Quentyn's gaze drifted to her and rested upon her in silence.

Presently she smiled.

"How kind you are to care so much, to care at all!"

"I do care."

"Are you, will you, be my friend, always?" asked Milly, leaning towards her a little, and the smile seemed to flutter to the other woman like an appealing and grateful kiss.

"I am your friend; I will be your friend, always," Mrs. Drent replied, in an even lower tone than before.

The tears came softly into Milly's eyes while they looked at each other she gently, Mrs. Drent still sombrely. Then leaning back again with a sigh, she continued, "Why I loved him? I didn't love him. Isn't that the almost invariable answer? I was nineteen; I had just left the schoolroom; I was in love with my own ideal of love—you know, you must know, the silly, pa-

thetic, sentimental and selfish mixture one is at nineteen;—and Mamma said that he was that ideal; and he said nothing; so I believed her! Poor Dick! He was in love, I think, really, and not a bit with himself, and with only enough articulateness to ask me to marry him; and of course he was, and is, very good-looking. You know Mamma. She has married us all off very well, they say; you know how they say it. In her determination to ensconce the family type comfortably she is as careless of the single life as nature itself. In this case what appeared to be a very cosy niche offered itself for me and she shoved me into it. I have grown up since then; that is all my story."

"They are terrible, terrible, such marriages," said Mrs. Drent, looking away.

Her tone struck Milly, with all her consciousness of pathos, as perhaps a little misplaced. "Terrible? No, hardly that, I think. I did believe that I loved him. He did love me."

"You were a child who did not know herself, nor what she was doing."

"Yes; that is true."

"And it is terrible for him if he still loves you."

"Oh," said Milly, with another sigh, "if you can call it love. He is rather dismayed by the situation; sorry that we don't hit it off better, as he would express it; jocosely resigned to what he would call my unkindness and queerness. But as for tragedy, suffering; —one can't associate such perturbing things with imperturbable Dick. I haven't to reproach myself with having hurt his life seriously, and, Heaven knows! I don't reproach his simplicity and harmlessness for having broken mine. Marriage and a wife were incidents—incidents only—to him, and if they have failed to be satisfactory incidents, he has other far more absorbing interests in his life to take his mind off the breakdown of his domestic happiness. Indeed, domesticity, when he cares to avail himself of it, is always there in its superficial forms and ceremonies. I can't pretend to love him, but I take care of his money and his house, I entertain his friends, I give him his tea at breakfast and a decorous kiss when he comes back from shooting animals in some savage country. One could hardly call us separated, so discreetly do I bridge the chasm with all the conventional observances. Thank Heaven! the shooting is his one great passion, so that he is usually

wandering happily in distant jungles and not requiring too many *tête-à-têtes* at breakfast of me."

"He is probably very good and kind," said Mrs. Drent, "but it is incredible that such a man should be married to such a woman as you."

Again Milly gazed for a moment, aware of inappropriateness. "You have a very high ideal of marriage, haven't you?" she said. Mrs. Drent's husband had died five years before, and her baby when it was born. She wore black, exquisite and unobtrusive always, and, unobtrusively, she was known to be inconsolable. Yet Milly had heard it whispered that Gilbert Drent had married her for her money and that, charming person though he had been, she had passionately idealized him. There was, therefore, with these memories at the back of her mind, something painful as well as pathetic to her in the voice in which Mrs. Drent, crimsoning deeply, said: "My own marriage was ideal. I don't understand marriage unless it is ideal."

There was a silence after that for a moment and then Milly said, "It must be wonderful to have such a memory. All I know is that I wish with all my heart I had never married

Dick, and I believe with all my heart that one shouldn't marry unless everything is there."

"That is it," said Mrs. Drent, "everything must be there for it to be right;—affinity, and understanding, and devotion. Some women can find enough in the mere fact of a home and a shared life to be satisfied without them; but not a woman like you."

"I think you idealize me," Milly said smiling a little sadly; "but I believe in that too. I don't claim at all any remarkable individuality; but what I have Dick doesn't understand at all, doesn't even see. He goes blundering about the dullest, most distant parks and preserves of a castle; that is as near as he ever gets to the castle, such as it is, of my personality. And he doesn't really care about the castle; it hardly worries him that he can't find it. There might be wonderful pictures on its walls, and jewels in its cabinets, and music in its chambers; but even if he got inside and were able to see and hear, he wouldn't care a bit about them; he would say: 'Awfully nice,' and look for the smoking-room. And there," said Milly, pressing her hands together while her eyes filled suddenly with tears, "there is the little tragedy. For of course every woman thinks that she has pictures and jewels and music and longs—oh

longs!—to show them to the one, the one person who will love to see and hear. And when she finds that no one sees or hears, or knows, even, that there is anything to look for, then the music dies, and the pictures fade, and the jewels grow dim, and at last everything magical vanishes from life and she sees herself, not as an enchanted castle, but as a first-class house in Mayfair, with all the latest improvements;—as much a matter of course, as much a convenience, as unmysterious and as unalluring as the telephone, the hot water pipes and the electric lighting. It is only as if in a dream—a far, far dream—that she remembers the castle, and feels, sometimes, within her, the ruins, the empty ruins."

"Oh—my dear!" breathed Mrs. Drent. It was as if she couldn't help it, as if, shaken from her passionate reserve, she must show her very heart. She leaned round the table and took one of Milly's hands. "Don't—don't let the magic vanish! There's nothing else in life! All the rest is death. It's only when we are in the castle—with our music and our pictures and our jewels—that we are alive. You know it; you feel it; it's what makes the difference between the real and the unreal people. You are one of the real ones, I saw it at once; you aren't meant

to wither out and to become crisp and shallow. Don't cease to believe in the pictures, the jewels, the music. They are there. *I* see. *I* hear."

"How—*sweet* of you!" faltered Milly.

She was startled, she was touched, she, who rarely felt it, felt shyness. She had known that this dark, still woman was observing her, and had known, for all the other's reserve, that the observation was not antagonistic. Something in Mrs. Drent had made her feel that it would be easy, a relief, to talk to her about all one's miseries and desolations. But the sudden leap of spiritual fire found her unprepared. She was a little ashamed, as though her own reality were somewhat unreal beside Mrs. Drent's belief in it. There had been something pleasant in the tracing of her little tragedy, something sweet in the thought of that sad castle of her soul, with its stilled music, its fading enchantments; but Mrs. Drent had seen only the tragedy; and had felt the danger of withering, of becoming acquiescent and commonplace, with an intensity of which she herself was incapable. Such response, such understanding, might well take one's breath away.

This scene was the beginning of their long friendship. It was a charming friendship. Milly Quentyn, for all the clouds of her back-

ground, was a creature of sunshine, of sunshine in a mist, a creature of endearing fluctuations. Indeed, Christina told her afterwards, when they analyzed the beginnings, it had been her childlike radiance, her smiles, her air as of rifts of blue over a rainy landscape—(for everybody knew that Dick and Milly Quentyn didn't hit it off)—it had been these sweet, these doubly pathetic qualities that had first attracted her. "I am not easily attracted," said Christina. "Had there been a languishing hint of the *femme incomprise* about you, any air of self-pity, I should never have so longed to take care of you, to try to help to make you happier. But you were made for happiness and beauty, and if you didn't succeed in keeping them one saw that it would hurt you dreadfully. It was that that so appealed."

And Milly confessed to Christina that she had been at first a good deal afraid of her, as the distinguished young poetess, and had thought of her as a sombre and humourless little personage, only reassuring in being so enchantingly well-dressed.

In Christina Drent's poetry the numbness that had descended upon her after her husband's death had found a partial awakening. The poems were not great things, but they

were written without a touch of artifice. They were sudden, spontaneous and swift, and it was as if, in reading them, one heard a distant wail or saw across a bleak sky the flight of an unknown bird. In her own little world of fashion they had made her a tolerably famous figure. But it was an echo only of her regrets and longings that Christina was able to put into her poems, all perhaps that she chose to put; they were never intimate or personal. The essence of her was that passionate reserve and, with it, that passionate longing to devote herself, lavishly, exclusively, upon one idolized and, inevitably, idealized object. She was full of a fervour of faith, once the reserve was broken down, and her idol, high on a pedestal in its well-built temple, was secure henceforth from overthrow.

Such an idol her husband had been. Such an idol her child would have been. The doors of that sanctuary were sealed for ever, the sacred emptiness for ever empty; Christina could never have remarried. But beside it rose a second temple, only less fair, and in it, lovingly enshrined, stood Milly Quentyn.

Happily Milly was an idol worthy of idealization, perhaps even worthy of temple-building. She was sweet and tender, in friendship most

upright and loyal. She loved to be loved, to see her own tenderness blossom about her in responsive tenderness. She was not vain, but she loved those she cared for to find her exquisite, and to show her that they did. Like a frail flower, unvisited by sunlight, she could hardly live without other lives about her, fortifying, expanding her own. Her disappointment in her husband had turned to something like a wan disgust. His crude appreciations of her, which, in the first girlish trust of her married life, she had taken as warrant of all the subtle, manifold appreciations that she needed, were now offences. Poor Dick Quentyn blundered deeper and deeper into the quagmire of his wife's disdain. His was a boyish, unexacting nature. He asked for no great things, and the lack of even small mercies left him serene. As he had never thought about himself at all, it did not surprise him that his wife thought very little of him; he did not, because of it, think less well of himself. Milly's indifference argued in her a difference from most women, facilely contented as they usually seemed. It did not change or harm him or make him either assertive or self-conscious.

He had soon discovered that the things he cared to talk about wearied her—sport, the

estate, very uncomplex politics or very uncomplex books; and after a little while he discovered, further, that for him to try to adapt himself to her, to try to talk about the things she cared for, exasperated her. She listened, indeed, with a bleak patience, while he admired, with a genial endeavour to do the right thing, all the wrong pictures at the shows where they went together. She sat silent, her eyes aloof, dimly smiling, while he tried to win her interest in a very jolly book,—watered Dumas, as a rule, decantered into modern bottles. He saw that she made an effort to care about the big game he shot—the hall and dining-room bristled with trophies, one walked over them everywhere—and she looked at pictures of them in the books of travel he eagerly put before her; but it was as pictures that they interested her, remotely, not as animals suitable for shooting.

Dick Quentyn, with an unmysterious, undifficult wife, could have been a very gracefully affectionate husband; his manners were as charming as his mind was blundering; but with this chill young nymph any attempt at marital pettings and caressings seemed clumsy and grotesque. With Milly, he soon felt it, the barrier between their minds was inevitably a

barrier shutting him out from even these manifestations of tenderness. He was not at all dull in feeling that; not at all dull in his quick withdrawal before her passive distaste; not dull in knowing that if he were not to withdraw the distaste would become more than negative. He had now, cheerfully, it seemed, recognized that his marriage was a failure and, as Milly had said, it did not seem, after an unpleasant wrench or two when he did show an uncontrollable grimace of pain, to make very much difference to him. She endured him; she did not dislike him at all—at a distance; and, very gaily, with a debonair manner of perfect trust, he kept at a distance. He travelled constantly, and it was rarely that he required her to pour out his tea for him.

Milly poured out his tea for a fortnight during Christina's first visit to Chawlton House, the Quentyns' country-place. Christina looked forward to meeting her friend's inappropriate husband almost with trembling. She felt that she might be called to the great and happy mission of reconciliation, that Milly might have been mistaken and Dick undervalued. Milly's trust in her and dependence upon her had grown with leaps and bounds, and she hoped that with tact and time she might do much to rebuild

the broken life, if there were materials with which to build it. The first glance at Dick showed her the futility of such hopes. He was a dear; that at once was obvious to her; and he was delightful looking; his small head well set on broad shoulders, his short nose expressive of courage and character; his grey eyes as free from all malice and uncharitableness as they were from introspection. But he was a boy, a kind, good boy, an ingenuous, well-mannered materialist, living, as it were, by automatic functions, and as incapable of spiritual initiative as he was of evil. What ground of meeting could there be between him and her Milly, compact as she was of subtleties, profundities and possibilities? No; Dick offered no materials for the building of a shrine, and unless marriage was a shrine Christina could not contemplate it. There had been a deep instinct, like one of nature's cruel yet righteous laws, in Milly's withdrawal; to have consented, to have compromised, would have been to stifle and stultify herself.

Christina so justified her, and yet it pained her that Milly, in her treatment of her husband, should be almost unbeautiful. The streak of hardness, almost of cruelty, like nature's own, showing itself in her darling, distressed her.

She did not care so much about Dick's very problematic discomfort. He showed none; he talked with great good spirits, made cheerful, obvious jokes and looked eminently sane, fresh and picturesque in his out-of-door attire. Yet even he must know that every fibre of Milly's face, every tone of her voice, expressed her indifference and her oppression. "Really, dear, you are not kind," Christina protested. Milly opened innocent eyes. "You think I'm wrong about Dick?"

"Not wrong about him; wrong to him. Surely, just because you are so right in what you feel to be impossibility, you can afford to be kind."

"You think I behave badly to Dick? Oh, Christina!—you are displeased with me?"

They were very sincere with each other, these two, and bared their souls to each other relentlessly.

"Only because you are so dear to me, Milly." Mrs. Drent flushed a little as she looked tenderly at her friend. "Only because I want to see you always right, exquisitely right. You make me uncomfortable when you are not. He has done you no wrong. Why should you treat him as you did this morning, using me as a foil to show him his own stupidity? Not that

I do find him stupid, Milly; only very, very simple."

"I know it! Oh, I know it!" Milly wailed. "If only he had done me a wrong it would be so much easier! He irritates me so unspeakably, and I seem to feel it more, now that I have you. That laboured chaffing of you at breakfast—how could you have borne it? I can't pretend amusement, and chaff is his only conception of human intercourse. I know I'm horrid—I know it; but it is the long, long accumulations of repressed exasperation that have made me so—worse than exasperations. I remember, during the first months of our married life, when I was becoming dreadfully frightened, catching glimpses on every side of my awful mistake—I remember once kissing him and saying something playful that hid an appeal for comfort, comprehension, reassurance. And do you know, he answered me with a chaffing jest—a stupid, stupid jest—some piece of would-be gallant folly. It was like a dagger!"

"Perhaps it pleased him so much, your kissing him, that it made him shy," Christina suggested, but Milly said:—"Dick shy! Oh no, he is not sensitive enough for shyness. He doesn't feel things at all as you, with your

exquisiteness, imagine. He isn't shy at all, and I'm afraid he is sometimes immensely, hideously stupid."

After all, as Christina came to see, Dick's inevitable loss was her own gain. Milly, who could not be her husband's, was hers, almost as a child might have been. Christina, for the first time in her life, knew the intoxicating experience of being sought out and needed. It was Milly who turned to her; Milly who put out appealing hands, like a lonely child; who nestled her head on her shoulder, contentedly sighing, as she begged her please, please not to go until she had to—and couldn't she, wouldn't she, stay on until the winter?

Why shouldn't she? Her own life was empty. It ended in her passing most of the winter with Milly in the country after Dick had gone off to India. It was a blissful winter, the happiest, in reality, that Christina had ever known, though she was not aware of this nor aware that it was the first time in her life that she was the recipient of as much devotion as she gave. They read and rode and walked and talked and carried on energetic reforms and charities in the village. Christina was full of ardent enthusiasms which infected Milly. In spite of her physical delicacy, for she had a

weak heart, she showed an enterprise and endurance that Milly was not capable of. The winter went by and life was full of significance.

Then Christina asked Milly to come and stay with her in London for the spring, and so, by degrees, they both came to think of home as the being together. Christina's little house in Sloane Street became a centre of discriminating hospitality; they had an equal talent for selection and recognition, and Milly possessed the irradiating attractive qualities that Christina lacked. Together they became something of a touchstone for the finer, more recondite elements in the vortex of the larger London life. All their people seemed to come to them through some pleasant affinity, the people who had done clever things; the people who, better still, shone only with latent possibilities and were the richer for their reticences; and dear, comfortable, unexacting people who were not particularly clever, but responsive, appreciative and genuine.

Christina still wrote a little, but not so much. She and Milly studied and travelled and, in the country, at the proper seasons, rusticated. With all its harmony, their life did not want its more closely knitting times of fear, as when

Milly was dangerously ill and Christina nursed her through the long crisis, or when Christina's heart showed alarming symptoms and hurried them away to German specialists.

There were funny little quarrels, too, funny to look back upon, though very painful at the moment; for Milly could be fretful, and Christina violent in reproach. The swift reconciliations atoned for all, when, holding each other's hands, they laughed at each other, each eager to take the blame. Certain defects they came to recognize and to take into account, tolerant, loving comprehension, the ripest stage of affection, seeming achieved. Milly was capricious, had moods of gloom and disconsolateness when nothing seemed to interest her, neither books nor music nor people, not even Christina, and when, sunken in a deep armchair, she would listlessly tap her fingers on the chair-arms, her eyes empty of all but a monotonous melancholy. These moods always hurt Christina,—Milly herself seemed hardly aware of them, certainly was not aware of their hurting,—and she hid the hurt in a gentle sympathy that averted tactful eyes from her friend's retirement. But she did not quite understand; for she never wished to retire into herself and away from Milly.

And Milly discovered that Christina could be unreasonable—so she tolerantly termed a smouldering element in her friend's nature; Christina, in fact, could be fiercely jealous. They shared all their friends, many of them dear friends, but dear on a certain level, below the illuminated solitude where they two stood in their precious isolation. And Milly protested to herself that she was the last person to wish that isolation disturbed. No one knew her, understood her, helped and loved her as Christina did; there was no one like Christina, no one so strong, so generous, so large-natured. Why then should Christina, like a foolish school-girl, show unmistakably—her efforts to hide it only making her look dim-eyed, white-lipped—a sombre misery if Milly allowed anyone to absorb her? This really piteous infirmity was latent in Christina; she did not show it at all during the first years of their companionship; it grew with her growing devotion to Milly. Milly discovered it when she asked little Joan Ashby to go to Italy with them. Christina, at the proposal, had been all glad, frank acquiescence. Unsuspectingly Milly petted and made much of the girl whose adoration was sweet to her. She went about with her sight-seeing, when Christina said that

she was tired and did not care to see things, not remembering that when they were alone together Christina had never seemed tired. She laughed and talked till all hours of the night with Joan, when Christina had gone to bed saying that she was sleepy. All had seemed peaceful and normal. Milly was stupefied when, by degrees, a consciousness of a difference in Christina crept upon her.

Christina smiled much, was alert, crisply responsive; but ice was in the smile, the response was galvanized. She was suffering—the realization rushed upon Milly once her innocent eyes were opened, and all her strength went to hiding the suffering. Milly, watching, felt a helpless alarm, really a shyness, gaining upon her in the face of this development. She found Christina sobbing in her room one night when she cut short her talk with Joan and came upon her unexpectedly.

Milly's tender heart rose at a bound over alarm and shyness. But when she ran to her, Christina pushed her fiercely away. "You know! Of course you know! Go back to her if you like her better!"

She was like a frantic child. Milly could have laughed, had not the exhibition in her grave, staunch Christina frightened her too

much, made her too terribly sorry and almost ashamed for her.

Later, when Christina, laughing quiveringly at her own folly, yet confessing her own powerlessness before it, put her arms around her neck and begged for forgiveness, Milly in all her soft, humorous reproaches daring now to tease and rally, had yet the chill of a new discovery to reckon with. A weight seemed to have come upon her as she realised how much Christina cared. It was as if Christina had confessed that she cared so much more than she, Milly, could ever do. She had not before thought of their friendship as a responsibility. It was too dear, and silly and pathetic in Christina, but it seemed to manacle her.

She must be very careful to like no Joans too much in the future. Christina protested passionately that she must talk to Joan and love Joan—any number of Joans, young or old, male or female, as much as before, more than before, since now her folly was dissipated by confession; but Milly in her heart knew better than to believe her. She filled Christina's life completely, to the exclusion of any other deep affection, and Christina could never be happy unless her friend's life were equally undivided.

CHAPTER II

DICK

FOUR years passed, and during them Dick Quentyn had wandered about the world, not at all disconsolately. He spent several seasons with friends in India; he went to Canada and to Japan; when he came home he filled his time largely with shooting and hunting.

It was almost as a guest that, in the country and in his own house, he passed a few weeks with Milly and Christina and entirely as a guest that he dined now and then with them in London.

It was a rather ludicrous situation, but he did not seem depressed or abashed by it. Christina always felt that by some boyish intuition he recognized in her a friendly sympathy, a sympathy which he must certainly see as terribly detached, since it was she who had now fixed definitely Milly's removal from his life, made it permanent and given it a meaning. But it was a sympathy very friendly, even slightly humorous. He would catch her dark

eyes sometimes as he sat, a guest at her dinner-table—(he never took Milly in, all the negations of married life were still his)—and in them he saw and responded to an almost affectionate playfulness. He evidently saw the joke and it amused him. Christina often reflected that Dick was a dear, in all his impossibility, and that Milly was not nearly nice enough to him. But Milly was nicer than she had been; the new effectiveness and happiness of her own life made it less of an effort to be so. From her illumined temple she smiled at him, a smile that gained in sweetness and lost its chill. She handed on to him a little of the radiance.

"Since we can't hit it off together, Milly, I must say there is no one you could have chosen for a friend that I could have liked so much as Mrs. Drent," Dick said to his wife one evening in the drawing-room after dinner. They often had an affable chat before the wondering eyes of the world. Milly chatted with great affability. Dick, as Christina so often reminded her, was a dear. No one could have less suggested shackles.

"Now, Dick," she said, smiling, "what do *you* find to like in Christina?" Even in her new tolerance there lurked touches of the old irrepressible disdain.

Dick, twisting his moustache, contemplated her. "Do you mean that I'm not capable of liking anything or anybody that you do?" he inquired. Milly flushed, though the mildness of her husband's tone, one of purely impersonal interest, suggested no conscious laying of a coal of fire upon her head. It was what she had meant. That Dick should like Christina, Christina Dick, was wholly delightful, but that Dick should seem to like what she liked for the same reasons irked her a little. It was rather as if he had expressed enthusiasms about her favourite Brahms Rhapsody. She rather wanted to show him that any idea he might entertain of a community of tastes was illusory. How could Dick like a Brahms Rhapsody, he whose highest ideals of music were of something sedative after a day's hard riding? And how could Dick really like Christina? If he really did, and for any of her reasons, there must be between them the link, if ever so small a one, of a community of taste—a link that she had never recognized.

"I think that we could only like the same things in a very different way," she confessed. "Why do you like Christina?"

He did not reply at once, and she went on, looking at him, smiling—they were sitting side

by side on a little sofa; "it isn't her charm, for you think her ugly."

"Yes; she's ugly certainly," Dick assented, quite as dully as she had hoped he would, "though her figure is rather neat."

Milly's smile shifted to its habitual kindly irony. "She is subtle and delicate and sensitive," she said, rehearsing to herself as much as to him all the reasons why Dick could not really like Christina. "Her truths would never blunder and her silences never bore." "As Dick's did," was in her mind. It was cruel to be so conscious of the contrast when he looked at her with such unconsciousness; to reassure herself with the expression of it was rather like mocking something blind and deaf and trusting. A sudden pity confused her, and, with a little artificiality of manner which masked the confusion, she went on: "One could never be unhappy without her knowing it, and then one would be glad she did know, for she can sympathise without hurting you with sympathy. She feels everything that is beautiful and rare, everything that is sad and tragic; she feels everything and sees everything, and she sees and feels in order to act, to give, to help. Is it all this you like in her?" Milly finished.

. Dick Quentyn still looked mildly at his wife. "Yes; I suppose so," he said.

"You see these things in Christina?"

"In a different way," he smiled. It was almost a very clever smile.

Milly might have felt startled at it had he not gone on very simply:—"One sees that she is such a thoroughly good sort; so loyal; she would go through thick and thin for anyone she cared about; and so kind, as you say; she would talk as nicely to a dull person as to a clever one; she'd never snub one or make one feel a duffer."

For a moment Milly was silent. "Do you mean that I used to snub you—and make you feel a duffer?" she then asked.

"Oh, I say, Milly!" Dick, genuinely distressed, looked his negative. "You didn't suppose?——"

"I know that I was often horrid."

"Well, if you were, you didn't suppose I'd tell you in that roundabout fashion. Besides, all that's done with long ago." He looked away from her now and down at the floor.

Again Milly was silent. Strangely to herself, she felt her eyes fill with tears. She waited to conquer them before saying very

gently: "Dick, do forgive me for having been so horrid."

He stared up at her. "Forgive you, Milly?" The request seemed to leave him speechless.

She was able to smile at him. "You do?"

"You never were. It's more to the point for me to ask you to forgive me."

"For what, pray?" She had to control a quiver in her voice.

"Oh—for everything—for being so wrong, so altogether the wrong person, you know," said Dick, smiling too. He again looked away from her, across the room, now, at Christina; and, after a silence, filled for Milly with perplexing impulses, he added: "But the real reason I like her so much is that she is so tremendously fond of you."

Milly had to bring her thoughts back with an effort to Christina; she must let his remark about being forgiven remain as casual as he had evidently felt it; and it was something else that he had said which more emphatically held her attention. She thought of it all the evening, after he had gone; and, while her hair was being brushed, she looked at her reflection in the mirror and saw herself in that time, "long ago." It was as if Dick had shown her a dead

thing, and had turned the key on it with his quiet words of acquiescence.

She looked in the mirror. Surrounded by the softly falling radiance of her hair, her face was still girlish in tint and outline; but already her eyes had in them the depth of time lived through, her cheeks and lips were differently sweet; and as the realization of time's swift passage stole upon her, a vague, strong protest filled her, a sense of deep, irremediable disappointment with life.

Dick Quentyn went that winter to Africa, and Milly gave her husband a farewell all kindness and composure, when he came to bid Christina and her good-bye. Composure was a habit, and she was unaware of a new discontent and protest that stirred beneath it, though aware that the kindness she felt for her husband was greater than what her words of farewell expressed.

Dick always wrote punctually, once a fortnight, to his wife, short bulletins, to which, as accurately and as laconically, she responded. This winter the bulletins were often delayed, sometimes altogether missing.

Dick had joined an exploring party, and his allusions, by the way, to "Narrow shaves," "Nasty rows with natives," and "A rather

beastly fever," explained these irregularities.

"He really ought to write a book about it. They have evidently been in danger, and had an heroic time of it altogether," Christina said, during a sympathetic perusal of these documents which were always handed on to her, as, for any intimacy they contained, they might have been handed on to anybody. They began —"Dear Milly"; and ended—"Yours aff'ly, D. Q." The "affectionately" was always abbreviated.

"I suppose they really are in a good deal of danger," said Milly, nibbling at her toast,—they were at breakfast.

"That, I suppose, was what they went for," Christina replied, her eyes passing over the letter.

Milly, leaning her elbow on the table, watched and read. "Poor Dick!" she said presently.

Christina had laid down the letter and was going on with her coffee.

"Why poor, dear? It's what he enjoys."

"If he were killed to-morrow I suppose it would hardly affect us more than the death of any of the men who had tea here yesterday."

"Milly!" said Christina. She put down her cup.

"Would it?" Milly insisted. "Would you really mind more?"

"Your husband—my child!" This elder-sister mode of address was often Christina's.

"Why should a husband one hasn't been able to live with count for as much as a friend one is glad to see?"

"Because he has counted for so much."

"But, Christina, you can't deny that you would hardly be sorry, and that you would not expect me to be sorry—only solemn."

"I should expect you to be both."

"Sorry because a man I have no affection for—a man I have almost hated—is dead?"

"Yes; if only for those reasons; and that it should be only for those reasons is what you meant when you said: 'Poor Dick,'" Christina demonstrated with an air of finality that showed her displeased with what she felt to be an unbecoming levity.

Milly was thinner, paler; Christina noticed that, though she did not notice how often she returned to the subject of her husband's danger and the irony of her own indifference to it. And Milly's listless moods followed one other so closely this winter as to become almost permanent. She was evidently bored. More and more frequently, when they were talking over

their *tête-à-tête* tea, the very dearest hour of the day, Christina saw that Milly did not hear her. After these four years of comprehension and mutual forbearance the apparent indifference or preoccupation could not, at first, seriously disturb her; hurt her it always did. Picking up a book she would read and cease to talk. The mood always passed the sooner for not being recognised, and Milly would come out of the cloud, unaware of it, sunnier, sweeter, more responsive than before. But this winter she did not come out. That she should be so bored, so apathetic, began to disturb as well as to hurt Christina. There came a quick pulsing of fear; did some new attachment account for it? Her mind, in a swift, flame-like running around the circle of possibilities, saw them all as impossibilities, and put the fear away.

One day, taking Milly's face between her hands, yet feeling, strangely, a sudden shyness that made the complete confession of her alarms too difficult, she asked her if she were unhappy.

"Unhappy, dear Christina? Why should I be?" Milly put an affectionate arm about her friend's neck.

"But are you? Is there anything you would

like to do? Anywhere you would like to go? I am sure that you are frightfully bored," Christina smiled. "Confess that you are."

"Have I seemed bored? No. I can't think of anything that would interest me. One comes on these Sahara-like times in life, you know—stretches of dull sands. Or is it that I am getting old, Christina?"

"You old? You, child!"

"I feel old," said Milly. "Really old and tired."

Christina still smiled at her, but smiled over a sudden choking in her throat. It was not sympathy for her friend's *Weltschmertz;* it was the recognition of something in her eyes, her voice—something she could not analyze, as if a faint barrier wavered, impalpable, formless, between them, and as if, did she say that it was there, it would change suddenly to stone and perhaps shut her out for ever.

What was it in Milly that made her afraid that to cry out her fears might make them permanent? She battled with them all the winter. They had arranged to go to Sicily and Greece for the spring, and Christina looked forward to this trip as a definite goal. It would break the spell, turn the difficult corner,—for all her fierce idealism she was too wise a woman

not to know that every human relation must have corners; and, indeed, in talking over plans, getting up information, burnishing historical memories, Milly showed some of her old girlish eagerness. She and Christina even read the Greek tragedies over together, in order, Milly said, that they should steep themselves in the proper atmosphere. It was therefore with a shock of bitter surprise and disappointment that Christina, only a fortnight before the time fixed for their departure, heard Milly announce, with evident openness, though she flushed slightly, that she thought she would rather put off the trip; she would rather spend April at Chawlton; and, at once going on, looking clearly at her friend: "You see, dear, I have just had a letter from Dick. He gets back next week and is going down there. He says that he wants to see the primroses after that horrid Africa;—quite a poetical touch, isn't it,—for Dick! And I think it would be really a little too brutal of me, wouldn't it, if I sailed off without seeing him at all—without pouring out his tea for even one week."

Milly was smiling, really with her own soft gaiety; the flush had gone. Christina was convinced of her own misinterpretation. Duty had called Milly away from pleasure, and she

had feared, for a moment, that her friend would think too much sacrifice to it.

"Of course, dearest, of course we will put it off," she said. "And of course we will go down to welcome home the wanderer. It is sweet of you to have thought of it."

Milly kissed her. "You see I am becoming quite a virtuous woman," she said. "And it is a pity to miss the primroses."

The packing projects turned topsy-turvy, servants to be redistributed, Christina saw to all, while Milly, with still her new cheerfulness, flitted in the spring sunshine from shop to shop, decking herself in appropriate butterfly garments. They were to get to Chawlton only a day or two before Dick's arrival.

The gardens, the lawns, the woods, were radiant, and Milly, in the environment of jocund revival, shared the radiance. All barriers seemed gone, were it not that Christina, full of strange presages, felt the very radiance to make one.

Milly gathered primroses in the woods, hatless, her white dress and fair head shining among the young greys and greens. She came in laden with flowers, and the house smiled with their pale gold, their innocent and fragile gaiety. "Isn't the country delicious?" she said

to Christina. "Much nicer than dreary Greece and tiresome ruins, isn't it?"

"Much," said Christina, who was finding the country, the spring, the sunshine, the very primroses, full of a haunting melancholy.

"I have a thirst for simplicity and freshness and life," Milly went on, looking at the sky, "and how one feels them all here. Oh, the cuckoo, Christina, isn't it a sound that makes one think of tears and happiness!"

Of tears only, not of happiness, thought Christina; of regret—regret for something gone; lost for ever. The cuckoo's cry pierced her all day long.

Simplicity and freshness and life; Christina did not recall the words definitely when she saw Dick Quentyn spring up the steps to greet his wife at the threshold of the house; but something unformulated echoed in her mind with a deepened sense of presage.

Milly stretched out both her hands. "Welcome home, Dick," she said. And she held her cheek to be kissed. There was no restraint or shyness in her eyes. She looked at the bronzed, stalwart, smiling being with as open and happy a gaze as though he had been an oak-tree. The happiness of gaze was new; but then it was only part of Milly's revival; and

then, he had been in danger. Christina took comfort, she knew not for what.

"It is good to be at home again," Dick asseverated more than once during the day; and, "I say, how jolly those primroses look," he exclaimed in the long drawing-room.

Milly, her arm in Christina's, stood beside him. "I gathered them, Dick, all of them, and arranged them, in honour of your return."

"Oh, come now!" Dick Quentyn ejaculated with humorous incredulity.

Milly smiled, making no protest. He, she and Christina walked about the grounds. Christina had felt a curious shrinking from joining them, a shrinking, in any normal condition of things between husband and wife, so natural that it was only with a shock of amazement that she recognized its monstrousness as applied to the actual one. She leave Milly alone with her husband! What a revolution in all their relations would such a withdrawal have portended! To leave them would have been to yield to morbid imaginations, to make them almost real; at all events to make them visible to Milly; and Milly certainly did not see them. Milly, indeed, seemed to see nothing.

She still held Christina's hand drawn through her arm while they walked and lis-

tened to Dick's laconic and much prompted recital of his African adventures.

"I do hope you won't go off on any more terrible expeditions of this sort for a very long time, Dick," said Milly. "I expected every morning to read in the newspaper that you'd been eaten by savages."

"Well, I wasn't among cannibals, you know," literal Dick objected, "and I think I'll have to have another brush at it. Harvey is going out in a month or so."

"And you are going with him?"

"Well, I rather think I shall," said Dick. "He is a splendid fellow, and it seems my sort of thing."

Before dinner, in the drawing-room, he joined Christina, who was sitting alone looking out at the evening. "As inseparable as ever, you and Milly, aren't you?" he said, coming and standing over her, his genial eyes upon her.

"Just as inseparable," she assented, looking up at him. She smiled with an emphasis that was faintly defiant, though neither she nor Dick recognized defiance.

"Milly is looking a little fagged, don't you think," he went on. "Has she been doing too much this winter? You are frightfully busy,

aren't you? Milly always likes going at a great pace, I know."

"I should not have thought there was anything noticeable," said Christina. "She was a little fagged, perhaps; but the country has already refreshed her wonderfully."

"London always does pull one down, I hate the beastly place," said Dick. And he went on: "She is being awfully nice to me. I don't remember her ever having been so nice—since, I mean, we decided that we couldn't hit it off. One would really say that she rather liked seeing me!" and Dick smiled, as if the joke were very comical.

"You have been in such danger. Milly can but feel relief." Her voice was full of an odd repression, discouragement, but Dick was altogether too innocent of any hope to be aware of discouragement or repression.

"She was worried about me? Really? That was awfully good of her," he said.

Christina was remembering that Milly had only expressed indifference as to Dick's danger.

The ensuing evening was, to Christina, uncanny in its unapparent strangeness. She and Dick were both aware of novelty and Milly was aware of none. Her cheerful kindness was as natural and spontaneous as though she had

been a girl greeting a long absent brother. She questioned Dick, and, as her questions showed interest—interest and a knowledge horribly surprising to Christina—Dick talked with unusual fluency. Christina looked at them and listened to them, while Milly, leaning an arm on the table, gazed with gravely shining eyes at her husband. The arm, the eyes, the lines of the throat, were very lovely. Christina's mind fixed upon that beauty, and she wished that Milly would not lean so and look so. Milly, again, was unaware. It was Christina who was aware; Christina who was quivering with latent, unformulated consciousness. After dinner, Milly and Dick still talked; she still listened. She knew nothing about Africa.

For three or four days this was the situation; a reunited brother and sister; a friend, for the time being, necessarily incidental. Then, suddenly, the presages grew plainly ominous. Was it her own realization of loneliness, of not being needed, that so overwhelmed her? or the sense of some utter change in her darling—a change so gradual that until its accomplishment it had seemed madness to recognize it? The moment of recognition came one day, when, on going into the library, she

found Dick and Milly sitting side by side at the table, their heads bent over a map; and they were not looking at the map; they were looking at each other; still like brother and sister, but such fond brother and sister, while they smiled and talked.

Milly turned her head and saw Christina, and Christina knew that some evident adjustment went over her own face, for Milly jumped up, eagerly, too eagerly, and pulled a chair back for her and said; "Sit down, dearest. Dick is telling me adventures."

What was it that drove into Christina's heart like a knife? Milly smiled at her, eagerly smiled; and yet she was miles and miles away; had she been in the jungles of Africa with her husband she could not have been further; and she was greeting her as though she were a guest, greeting her with conventional warmth and courteous sweetness. Christina was not wanted; through the warmth and sweetness she felt that.

Smiling, she said she had come for a book. Going to the book-cases she sought for one accurately—why she should seek, as though she had come in with the intention of finding it, a volume of frothy eighteenth century French memoirs she could not have told—and, smil-

ing again upon them with unconstrained lightness, she left them. She walked steadily to her room, locked the door, and, falling upon her knees beside the bed, broke into an agony of tears.

. . . . . .

The end had come; not of Christina's love, not of her need, but of Milly's. At first her mind refused to face the full realization—groped among the omens of the past, would not see in Dick, even now, the cause of all. She could trace the gradual, the dreadful severance; Milly's slow loss of interest in her and in their life together. It was at first only for the fact of loss that she wept, that loss, only, she could look at. But by degrees, as her stifled sobs grew quieter, she was able to think, to think clearly, fiercely, with desperate snatchings at hope, while she crouched by the bed; pushing back her hair from her forehead; pressing her hot temples with icy hands.

Why should Milly lose interest? How could she? How could love and truest sympathy, truest understanding—how could they fail?

"Love begets love. Love begets love," she whispered under her breath, not knowing that

she spoke, and, in this hour of shipwreck, clinging unconsciously to such spars and fragments of childish, unreasoning trust as her memory tossed her. No other friendship threatened hers; she was first as friend, irrevocably, she knew it. First as friend did not mean to Milly, could never mean, the deep-dwelling devotion that it meant to her; but such affinity and attachment as Milly felt could not die without some other cause than mere weariness. And the truth no longer to be evaded broke over her. It was the simplest while the most absurd of truths. Milly was falling in love; Milly was falling in love with Dick; and she was frank and happy because she did not know it; and he did not know it. Like two children with a fresh day of play and sunshine before them, they were engaged in merry, trivial games, picnics, make-believes, no thought of sentiment or emotion in them to account for the new sympathy; but from these games they would return hand in hand, all in all to each other, bound together in the lover's illusion and needing no one else. Maps! Travels! Africa! Did they not see these things as silly toys, as she did? What could Milly care for such toys? That she should play with them, as if she placed tin

soldiers and blew a tin trumpet, showed the fatal glamour that was upon her; glamour only, a moonshine mood of vague restlessness and craving. How dignify by the sacred name of love this sentiment, all made of her weakness, her emotionalism, her egotism, that swayed her now so ludicrously towards the man whom, open-eyed, she had rejected and scorned for years?

Passionate repudiation of the debasement for Milly swept through the stricken friend and mingled with the throes of her anguish for herself. For how was she to live without Milly? How could she live as Milly's formal friend, kept outside the circle of intimate affection, the circle where, till now, she had reigned alone? Ah! she understood Milly's nature too well; she saw that with all its sweetness it was slight. Love, with her, would efface all friendships. Like a delicate, narrow little vase, her heart could hold but one deep feeling. She would come, simply, not to care for Christina at all. Would come? Had she not come already? In her eyes, her smiles, the empty caressing of her voice, was there not already the most profound indifference? And all the forces of Christina's nature rose in rebellion. She felt the rebellion like the on-

slaught of angels of light against powers of darkness; it was the ideal doing battle with some primal, instinctive force. She must fight for Milly and for herself. For she, too, had her claim. She measured herself beside Dick Quentyn, her needs beside his. His life was cheerful, contented, complete; hers without Milly would be a warped, a meaningless, a broken life. Strangely, her thoughts, in all their anguish, turned in not one reproach upon her friend; rather, her comprehension, from maternal heights of love, sorrowed over her with infinite tenderness. For, so she told herself, she could have resigned her, in spite of her own bereavement, to true companionship, true fulfilment. But Milly—her Milly—made hers by all these years—in love with Dick Quentyn! It was a calamity, a disease which had befallen her darling. Asking no heights, this love would lead her down to contented levels, and Milly's life, too, in all true senses, would be warped and meaningless and broken.

Meanwhile, in the library, Dick said to his wife: "An't I interrupting you? Don't you read or talk or do something with Mrs. Drent at this time of the day?"

And at the question alone, contentedly alone with him as she was, dimly enlightened, too,

by Christina's guarded glance, Milly made a swift, surprised survey of the situation. She did not want to talk to Christina; she wanted to go on talking to Dick. She had not as yet realized that Christina's presence had become an interruption, a burden; Christina's personality had seemed blurred, merely, and far away. She was now aware of this, aware, for the first time, of something to hide from Christina, and a sense of awkwardness and almost of confusion came upon her.

"Oh no, you are not interrupting us. Christina and I will have heaps of time for talking and reading when you are gone," she said, smiling and blushing faintly.

Dick, even more unconscious than she of its meaning, gazed at the blush, and then they went on with their talk about crocodiles.

When Christina saw Milly again that evening, it was evident to her that Milly had at last become aware of something changed, and that her own composure urged Milly into a self-protecting overdemonstrativeness. She was completely composed. She stood aside, mild, unemphatic, unaware, seeming not to see, making no effort to hold; and as her desperate dread thus instinctively armed her, she saw that no other attitude could have been so ef-

ficacious. When she stood aside, Milly was forced to draw her in; when she pretended to see nothing, Milly must pretend—to her and to Dick—that there was nothing to see. Milly was afraid of her; that became apparent to her during the ensuing days, terrible, lovely days of spring, when, as if with drawn breath and cold, measuring eye, she crossed an abyss on a narrow plank laid above the emptiness. Milly was afraid; of her scorn and incredulity, perhaps; perhaps only of her pain. Milly was cowardly in her shrinking from giving pain; it would be impossible for her to go to her friend and say:—"I have fallen in love with my husband, and you and I must part." In that impossibility for Milly lay her only hope. If Milly and Dick could be held apart, and by Milly's own cowardice rather than by any word or gesture of her own, the wretched interlude might pass and Milly come to look back upon it with shame and amazement and to thank her friend for the strength and control that had made escape possible.

And the first-fruits of her strategy were soon apparent. Milly saw less and less of Dick. Dick, as of old, made no attempt to seek her out and, obviously, it was now impossible for Milly, with Christina's quiet eyes upon her, to

seek him. Milly took up again the idea of Greece and said that, after all, they must go that spring. They would all, she gaily declared, go up to London and depart to their different quarters of the globe at the same time, Dick to Africa and she and Christina to Greece. This was said in Dick's presence and he cheerfully acquiesced. Christina wondered if Milly had not hoped for some protest or suggestion from him. In Dick's blindness lay, she began to see, an even greater hope than in Milly's cowardice. Milly could not very well come to her and avow her love for Dick when Dick, it was evident, did not dream of avowing his for her. And Milly became aware of this as she did. Her manner towards Dick changed. She rallied him with a touch of irritability; she scored off him as she had used to do, by means of Christina; she put forward Christina and her relation to Christina constantly, and seemed to taunt him, as of old, with his own inadequacy. All her innocent gaiety was gone; she hid her deep disquiet under an air of feverish brightness, and poor stupid Dick, accepting Milly's alteration as he had always accepted things from her, showed no hurt and no reproach; he merely effaced himself, cheerfully, once more.

Christina understood it all and the breathless subterfuges in which Milly's perturbation concealed itself. She was longing that Dick should see what she could not show, and that he should break through the web with an avowal. She was longing that Christina, if Dick remained blind, should mercifully give Dick and her their chance. Christina knew the horrible risk she ran in remaining blandly unaware, in continuing to take Milly at her word, in keeping there, between her and Dick, where Milly herself placed her. She might part them, but Milly might come to hate her.

Milly's plan was carried out: they all went up to town together, Milly to her friend's house, Dick to his bachelor's chambers. And it was Christina who asked Dick to come and dine with them the night before he left for Africa. She maintained every appearance. The very air that night was electric with the restraints ready to burst into reverberations which would surprise no one but Dick. Christina herself was aware of a strange little dart of impatience with him. His stupidity helped her as nothing else could have helped; yet, while she blessed it, she could feel for Milly, and actually, while she blessed, resent it. It

was true that she read in his eyes a slight shyness as they rested upon his wife. He was bewildered, and it was evident he was not happy. And Milly had dropped her shield of flippancy. She sat silent, absent, absorbed, looking up at her husband now and then, with curious eyes, eyes cold and deep and suffering. Christina saw it all. Should she leave them now, it was inevitable that the revelation would come, and it would come from Milly. Mutely, in their respective unconsciousness and consciousness, they were begging her to go; and she sat on. Her inflexible determination upheld her over the terrible falsity of her position. Milly, now, must know that she knew; yet she sat on, smiling, talking, until the hour was late.

Then, as Dick rose, it was Milly who went towards the barrier that she herself had raised and showed Dick that it had an unlocked gate. From her deep knowledge of Milly's nature, Christina could gauge, with a dreadful accuracy, what the strength of the feeling must be that could nerve her, rising and sauntering to the door beside him, to say in a strange, in a nonchalant voice: "How about a walk in the park to-morrow, Dick? You don't go till the evening, do you?"

Dick stared for a moment. He was pitiably,

mercifully stupid. His stare might really have been interpreted as one of mere astonishment. Then:

"Really?" he asked. "Aren't you and Mrs. Drent too busy?"

"No, indeed. Our arrangements are all made."

"Shall I come for you here?"

"Do. At eleven."

They shook hands, and Dick took Christina's hand. She felt, always, that Dick looked upon her as a friend. His eyes, now, revealed to her his boyish wonder and gladness. She and Milly were left alone. Milly, still with the sauntering step, went to the mantelpiece and touched her hair, looking in the glass. "Dear me, how late!" she said, her eyes turning to the clock. "How dreadful of us to have kept poor Dick up so late. Shall we go to bed, dearest? I'm dreadfully sleepy."

"You didn't mean me to come for the walk, too, did you?" Christina asked, in a voice as easy, putting up her hand to hide a yawn. "It's our usual hour;—that's why I ask. But you meant him to understand that you wanted it to be a *tête-à-tête,* didn't you? It's all right. I can go to Mrs. Pomfret's for my fitting at eleven."

"But, dearest, of course you are coming," said Milly instantly.

Their eyes were on each other now, and their faces armed and masked. Christina measured the depth of estrangement in all that the flexible, disingenuous acquiescence hid of disappointment, bitterness, even hatred.

"Oh no, no, indeed; I think you ought to have your good-bye walk alone," she insisted. "He will expect it now. I'm sure he thought that you particularly wanted it to be alone."

"He couldn't have thought anything so unlikely," said Milly. "It is our good-bye walk with you."

So Christina went with them. She felt herself still trembling in every nerve from the appalling risk she had run, and ran; for which was the greater risk, that Milly should realize her guile and hate her, or that Milly and Dick should come to an understanding? She could not tell; nor where she stood; yet triumph trembled in her fear. She had succeeded. They had not spoken together. In the park she and Milly bade Dick good-bye. Dick's train was to go in the early evening. Milly, when they reached home—and she had talked lightly if not gaily in the hansom—said that she had rather a headache. She would have her lunch-

eon in her room and sleep through the afternoon and be fit and fresh for the play that night. Christina knew in an instant that a last desperate hope cowered beneath the affected languor and lightness; and it watched her, feverishly, like the eyes of a tracked animal creeping in an underbrush past enemies' guns. When she replied, kissing her friend tenderly, that a good rest was the best of cures for a headache and that she herself would do some shopping and go to the tea for which they were engaged, these large, sick eyes of Milly's hope and fear widened and shone with a recovered security. She wanted to be left alone that afternoon. She would not go to Dick; Christina knew her too accurately to believe that possible, and Dick had been too stupid to make it conceivable; but what Milly hoped for was a sudden illumination of Dick's stupidity; some tug of unendurable pain or surmise that would bring him back on the chance of seeing her again. Milly's logic was instinctive, but Christina believed that it was sound. Dick, she, too, felt sure of it, would come. She lunched and then she sat at her writing-table and wrote some notes, looking out at the street, and then, when an hour approached in which a caller might appear, she went out.

It was one of the suddenly hot days in May that London sometimes offers. It was so hot that Christina's head, as she walked slowly up Sloane Street, swam and turned, and the lines of cabs and omnibuses and carriages in the roadway, upon which she fixed her eyes, seemed to pulse and float as they went by. Three o'clock had struck. Dick, if he came, must come before five, and she must walk up and down Sloane Street for perhaps nearly two hours. If she lay in wait in the house, Milly, who no doubt was already up and dressed and waiting, would discover her. Milly, too, might be watching from the drawing-room windows. Her peril was desperate, and her safest course was to walk on the side of the street near the house where Milly could not see her. This she did, turning regularly in her little beat, indifferent to the odd spectacle she must present, and scanning the passers-by. She had not long to wait. Half-an-hour had not elapsed, when, in an approaching hansom, she saw the broad shoulders and perplexed yet resolute features of Dick Quentyn. He, too, had come to final decisions on this fateful day.

Christina walked towards the hansom smiling. With her opened parasol and delicate dress of white and black she had the most un-

alarming and casual air. She seemed to have just stepped from her own doorway. She had held up her hand in signal, and Dick, arresting his cabman, sprang out. Christina greeted him gaily.

"Well, this is very nice. Can you really stop and speak to me? You're not running a risk of losing your train?"

Dick hardly smiled in answer. His face showed his uncertainty, his anxiety, his trouble.

"My train? Oh no;—I've over an hour yet. Heaps of time.—In fact—I was on my way to your house. I thought I'd have a last glimpse of you and Milly. Are you just going out?"

"Just going out. And as to Milly,—it's too bad," said Christina, "but she is getting a little sleep this afternoon and particularly asked that she shouldn't be disturbed. We are going to the play to-night. You'll walk with me for a little way, though, won't you?"

There was nothing ambiguous in her words or manner. They were certainly in keeping with the situation, and poor Dick Quentyn, although he looked almost haggard, turned obediently and walked beside her. He walked silently for a little way, while Christina talked, then, as they came out into Knightsbridge, he said, suddenly;—"Mrs. Drent,—may I ask you

about something?—Do you mind? Shall we go into the park for a little while?"

"Of course; of course," said Christina, kindly and mildly.

They went into the park and sat down on two chairs that faced the stream of carriages and had rhododendrons behind them. When they sat down, Christina's head swam so giddily that she feared she might be going to faint. She closed her eyes for a moment, mastering her weakness with a desperate effort. Dick did not notice her pallor. "You see," he said, leaning forward and boring small holes in the gravel with the point of his stick—"You see, —I think I must tell you—ask you for your advice—because you know Milly so much better than any one else in the world. You can tell me if I'm mistaken—or advise me what to do, you know. It's just this: I thought, when I first came home, that Milly had begun to care for me again—or, at all events, that she'd got over disliking me."

"Care for you? Dislike you?" Christina murmured vaguely. "Oh—I don't think it was ever that—of late years—since you'd so tactfully and charmingly understood and made everything so easy for her."

"No. Yes; it seemed she'd particularly got

over it," Dick, rather puzzled, assented. "And I mean, by caring, that she seemed so happy when I was there—at first, happier than I'd ever known her."

"She can dare to be happy with you now, you see; just because you have made her so secure."

"So secure?"

"Yes," Christina met his eyes. "So sure that you'll never ask anything of her, make anything difficult for her again."

Dick Quentyn grew red. "I never did do that, as far as I remember, after I understood."

"That is what Milly so deeply appreciates," Christina returned.

There was a little silence after this and Christina, in it, controlled her breaths from trembling. Then Dick, groping painfully among his impressions, put forward another. "She did mind, very much, my being in danger last winter; you told me that. She was worried, really worried about me?"

Like a hurried, jangling bell somewhere in the background of her mind Christina, as she, too, gathered together her impressions and memories, seemed to hear a reiterated "No lies; above all, no lies." But he had put the weapon into her hand, and though she felt as

if she held it lifted above some innocent life, it fell relentlessly.

"Did I say that Milly was worried about you? It was hardly that, I think; though, of course, she was glad to see you out of danger. Of course she was glad; how could anyone so gentle-hearted as Milly not be? But if you ask me what she did feel, I must tell you the truth. You want the truth, don't you? It is much better—for you and for Milly, isn't it, that there should be no misunderstandings?" —Dick nodded—his eyes fixed on her. "What Milly said, in the winter, when we had news of your danger,—was that it was rather dreadful to realize that if you were killed it would hardly affect her more than the death of any of the men who had come to tea with us the day before."

The knife had fallen and her victim, after a moment, turned dazed eyes away from her. "Milly said that? About me?"

"I was shocked," Christina murmured. She heard, as if from a far distance, the strange, hushed quality of her voice. Her own blood seemed to have been arrested.

"She wouldn't have minded more than that?"

"She said, when I reproached her, that I

could only expect her to be solemn, not sorry, over the death of a man for whom she had no affection, a man she had almost hated. Mr. Quentyn, I am so grieved for you. Of course, she doesn't hate you now; but I am afraid you have allowed yourself false hopes about Milly."

Dick, now, had risen to his feet and, facing her as she sat, he gazed over her head at the rhododendrons. "I wonder why she wanted me to come for a walk this morning. Yes, I did have false hopes. I thought that meant something. I've thought that all sorts of little things might mean something."

"Milly is so sweet and kind when she feels no pressure, no alarm. I thought, for a moment last night, that she meant you to have the walk alone. But as soon as you were gone she insisted on my coming with you. I've tried to help you, Mr. Quentyn. I've given you every chance. But there isn't any chance." It was well to do it thoroughly.

There was bewilderment and humiliation—at last humiliation—on Dick's face; but of incredulity not a trace. "I know how kind you've been," he said. "I've felt it."

Christina, now, had also risen. A dart of keenest pity, even admiration, went through her, horridly painful. "I am so dreadfully

sorry," she murmured. "I had to tell you—since you asked me;—I didn't want you to hurt Milly—and yourself—uselessly."

"I know. I perfectly understand," said Dick.

They walked in silence to Albert Gate, and there, as they paused in farewell, Christina suddenly, seizing his arm and speaking in a hurried whisper, said: "You have been splendid. I can't tell you how I feel it. If I can ever—at any time—do anything——" It was the truth, yet the falseness of such speech, from her to him, appalled her while she spoke. Her voice trailed off. "Forgive me. Good-bye—" she said.

They grasped each other's hands and Dick, as she broke away, saw that the tears were running down her face.

CHAPTER III

CHRISTINA

HE was gone. She had triumphed. And only pain and horror, as if for the innocent life she had taken, were about her. No joy, no triumph, in having snatched Milly from degradation.

At the thought of Milly the fear that drove upon her was so intense that it induced a curious lightness of head. She was uplifted and upheld above her own fear. The unnatural buoyancy became almost a lightness of heart. All was over. If she were a criminal she must profit by her crime and shelter herself from suspicion. They would be happy—of course they would be happy again—she and Milly. "Love begets love. Love begets love." She heard herself muttering the words almost gaily, like an incantation, as she walked down Sloane Street.

When she crossed the street and looked up at the house she saw that Milly was standing at

the drawing-room window looking down at her. Something in Milly's attitude there, in her beautiful dress and in her unsmiling gaze, suggested to Christina the thought of a captive princess watching the approach of some evil enchantress. Milly—her prisoner—her victim! Her darling Milly!—She beat away the black vision.

She went slowly upstairs and came slowly into the drawing-room. Milly had turned from the window and, with the same hard, unsmiling gaze, stood and watched her enter. Christina sank into a chair.

"Well," said Milly after a moment, and in a voice that Christina had never heard from her, "he did not come, you see. I am up and dressed—yes—you know that I intended to get up and dress as soon as you were gone, I am sure—and I have been waiting here for an hour—and he has not come. He has not cared enough to come. So there are no roundabout questions for you to ask or evasive answers for you to hear. You have the truth before you."

Christina was not at all surprised, though there was something so horrible in this unshrinking frankness from one so reticent, so delicate as Milly. She knew, as she heard her speak, that it was what she had expected. The

subterfuges of the past weeks lay in ruin about them. She sat, her eyes fallen, drawing off her gloves, and she said gently, "I am sorry, Milly, if you hoped that he would come."

"No," said Milly, not moving from her place. "You are not sorry, Christina. You are glad. You are sorry that I care and you are glad that he does not care, because you think that it will keep us together. But that is your mistake. It is all impossible now, and you have made it so. I am going away. I am going back to the country. I want to be alone."

Again Christina was not surprised; this was the fear which she had glanced down at from her haze of uncanny lightness.

"Have I made it so impossible? What have I done, Milly?" she asked, after a moment.

Milly sat down in the nearest chair. She had passed beyond fear. There was no mist or illusion in her calmness. "You didn't give us a chance," she said. "Not a chance. You saw how I cared. You saw how I had come to need him. You saw how stupid he was and unless he were helped he would see nothing. I was afraid to hurt you. Of course I was. Of course I was sorry for you, horribly sorry. And you traded on that. You saw that unless you stood aside I could do nothing."

"I thought that I did stand aside, Milly," said Christina after another moment.

"Never really," said Milly.

"I don't quite see what you mean by really, Milly," said Christina. "I left you with him whenever you gave me the opportunity for doing so. Perhaps you mean that I ought to have committed suicide."

"No; I don't mean that," Milly returned sullenly, with an unaltered hostility. "There are different ways of standing aside. You could have made it possible for me to tell you, openly, what I felt; you could have made me feel that you would be glad to have me happy with him. You need not have made me feel in everything you did and said—and didn't do or say—that if I went back to Dick I should be going to him over your dead body."

"I think you mean, Milly," Christina answered in her dull and gentle voice, "that I ought not to have loved you. That is my crime, is it not?"

"Yes; perhaps that is your crime, if you want to put it so," said Milly. "I don't blame you, you know. You could not help it. But your love has always been a prison. As long as I was contented in the prison you made it a very charming place to live in. But when I wanted

to be free, to have other, deeper, realler loves, I knew that I had a gaoler to get past, a gaoler who would not kill me, but whom I would have to kill. So that I sat in my cell and did not dare turn the key in the lock for fear of what would happen to you. And it isn't true to say that you left the door open. You pretended to, of course. But when I did make my one effort, when I did try to creep out under your eyes, you turned the key on me quickly enough. The walk this morning. You knew that I hoped for it alone. You knew that it was our last chance."

While Milly spoke these words to her, Christina sat with her head bent down and her hands pressed tightly together in her lap, and it seemed to her that she was weeping inwardly, tears of blood. It was shame, unutterable shame, that she felt, mixed with the anguish, and weighing her down to the earth. Shame for what she had done in sacrifice to the love she heard thus abused; shame for the truth, the cruel half-truth, in Milly's words; and shame for Milly that she could find it in her to speak such words to her. Deeper? Realler? Could any love, though tricked out in romantic conventions, be deeper or realler than the love she had for Milly? In the innermost cham-

bers of her heart she knew that, in spite of the cruel half-truth, what Milly said was not the whole. She would—oh yes, she would have given her up—with gladness—as a mother gives up her child—to a love that she could have recognized as ennobling. It had not been her own selfish clinging, only, that had nerved her. It had been the thought of Milly's truest good. And if she were to say this to Milly, she knew now what withering laughter she would hear.

The thought of this laughter from Milly's lips, of Milly's cruelty to her, hunted her down the first turning of concealment open to her. "I didn't want to come with you," she said. "You made me come. But I was glad—for your sake—because it shielded you. You had made it so obvious to him that you wanted it to be alone. I thought that you had made it too obvious."

Milly drew a long breath and a vivid red mounted to her cheeks. For some moments she sat still, saying nothing. Then, not meeting her friend's eyes, for they were now fixed on her, she rose.

"Yes. I have been unfair," said Milly. "I have been ungrateful and unkind, and unfair. I know that you have thought only of me; and

you saw what I've only realised in this last hour. It has hurt so terribly to realise it—to realise that I've had my chance of happiness and thrown it away and that now it's too late to get it back again—it's hurt so terribly that it has made me cruel. You have been right all along and I have been a fool. But there it is. I love him and I'm broken-hearted, and now all that I can do is to go away and hide myself."

She was going, actually going. Their life together was over, shattered. The intolerable realisation crashed down upon Christina's abasement. She stood up, staring at her friend. "You are going to leave me, Milly?" she asked.

Milly averted her eyes. "Yes, Christina. I want to be alone."

"But you will come back?"

"I don't know," said Milly. Still she averted her eyes; but, in the rigid silence that followed, compunction evidently wrought upon her. She glanced round at her suffering friend and Christina's eyes met hers. They hurt her. They were glazed, like the eyes of a deer, waiting for the hunter's final blow.

"Christina," she said, and her voice showed her pity; "won't you try to learn to live without me? Really—really—it can't come back

again, as it was. You must see that. Not after all that we have said, all that has happened. Learn to live without me. Get some nice woman and go to Greece and try to forget me. I can only mean suffering for you now, and I'm not nearly good enough for you."

At this Christina broke into dreadful sobs. She did not move towards her friend, but she stretched her clasped hands out towards her and said, while her voice, half-strangled, came in gasps: "Milly—Milly—Have you forgotten everything?—All the years when we were so happy together?—When he was nothing to you?—For all these years, Milly—nothing—nothing.—How can you care—suddenly—like this—when you have almost hated him for so long?—You know what you said, in the winter, Milly—that you would not care if he were to die."

Milly's eyes had hardened. She moved towards the door.

"Milly!" Christina's cry arrested her. She had to stop and listen, though her hand was on the door. "Wait! Forgive me!—I don't know what I am saying!—And it was true! It was! You did not care!—Oh don't be cruel to me. I shall die if you leave me. What have I done that you should change so?"

"You have done nothing, Christina," said Milly in a voice of schooled forbearance. "It is I who have changed, and been cruel, first to Dick and then to you. I am a shallow, feeble creature, but the shallowness was in thinking that I couldn't love my husband—not in loving him now. I don't want the things you and I had together. I only want the stupid, simple things that he could have given me. I want someone to be in love with me. That is it, I think. I am the most usual, common sort of woman, who must have someone in love with her and be in love. And I am in love with Dick. And I am too unhappy to think of anyone but myself."

Christina stood with her face covered. Convulsive sobs shook her.

"Good-bye," said Milly.

She did not reply. She moved her head a little, in negation? acquiescence? appeal?—Milly did not know. And since Christina still said nothing, she turned the handle softly and left her.

* * * * * * *

Milly went down to Chawlton. In the country, alone, she could sit and look at her life and at the wreckage she had made in it without feel-

ing that another's eyes were watching her. It pained her, when she could turn her mind from the humiliation of her own misery, to see how completely all love for poor Christina had died from her, to see how the perhaps crude and elemental love had killed the delicate, derivative affection. It was even sadder to realise that under the superficial pain lay a deep indifference. She was very sorry for Christina. She had accepted Christina's life and used it, and now, through the strange compulsion of fate, she must cut herself away from it, even if that were to leave it broken and bleeding. For if she were to remain sorry for Christina, to look back at her with pity and compunction, she must not see her. Words, glances, silences of Christina's rankled in her, and when she thought of them she could not forgive her. Christina had seen too much, understood too much. She was a blight upon her love, a menace to her tragic memory of it. Under everything, deeper than anything else in her feeling about Christina, was a dim repulsion and dislike.

That Christina had submitted showed in her letters, for Milly, before many days had passed, wrote kindly and mildly, in the tone which, for the future, she intended to use towards Chris-

tina. Milly surprised herself with her own calm ruthlessness. She found that the gentle and the cowardly can, when roused, be more cruel than the harsh and fearless. Her letters to Christina were serene and impersonal. They recognised a bond, but they defined its limits. They might have been letters written to a former governess, with whom her relation had been kindly but not fond. They never mentioned her husband's name, nor alluded, even indirectly, to her mistimed love; and to ask Christina's forgiveness again for her unjust arraignment of her would have been to allude indirectly to it.

And Christina's letters made no appeal. They were infrequent, hardly affectionate; amazingly tactful letters. Milly shrank in recognising how tactful. It showed Christina's power that she should be so tactful, should so master herself to a responsive calm. Milly had come to dread Christina's tact, her patience and her reticence, more than all the vehemence and passionate upbraidings of former years. Beneath the careful words she knew that a profound, undying hope lay hidden; pain, too, profound and undying. The thought of such hope, such pain, made Milly feel at once the pity and the repulsion.

In none of Christina's letters was there any mention of her health. Milly knew how fragile was her hold on life and how much had happened of late to tax it; but it was with a shock of something unrealisable, unbelievable, that she read one autumn morning, in a blurred and shaking hand: "I am very ill—dying, they say. Come to me at once. I must tell you something."

Christina dying. She had said that it would kill her. And what had she not said to Christina that might not well have killed her? Milly was stricken with dreadful remorse and horror.

She hastened to London.

The maid at the door of the little house in Sloane Street told her that Mrs. Drent was rapidly sinking. Milly read reproach in her simple eyes. "I did not know! Why was I not told?—Why was I not told?"—she repeated to the nurse who came to meet her. Mrs. Drent, the nurse said, would not have her sent for, but during these last few days she had become slightly delirious and had spoken of something she wished to tell, had, at last, insisted on writing herself. She could hardly live a day longer. Heart-failure had made her illness fatal.

In the sick room, Milly paused at the door. Was that Christina? That strange face with such phantom eyes? Christina's eyes did not look at her with reproach or with sorrow, but, it seemed, with terror, a wild, infectious terror; Milly felt it seize her as she stood, spellbound, by the door. Then a rush of immense pity and comprehension shook her through and through. Christina was dying, delirious, and what must she be feeling in her haunted abandonment and desolation? She ran to the bed weeping. She knelt beside it. Her tears rained upon Christina's hands, as she took her in her arms and kissed her. "Christina!—dearest Christina!—Forgive me! Forgive me! —I did not know!—Why did you not let me come and nurse you?—I have always nursed you! Why did you not tell me?—Oh, Christina!"

Holding her, kissing her, she could not see clearly the illumination that, at her words, illuminated the dying woman's face. Life seemed suddenly to leap to her eyes and lips. The terror vanished like a ghost in the uprising of morning sunlight. With a rapture of hope and yearning which resumed all her ebbing power, physical and spiritual, she stretched out her arms and clasped them about Milly's

neck. "Do you love me again?" she asked. Her voice was like a child's in its ecstasy.

"My darling Christina!—Love you?—Who is there in all the world but you!" Milly cried. No affirmation could be too strong, she felt, no atonement too great.

"Better than you love him?"

Milly did not even hesitate. Lies were like obstacles hardly seen as, in the onrush of her remorse and pity, she leaped them.—"Yes,—Yes. You are everything," she reiterated. "I love you best. It has passed—that feeling."

"It has passed! I knew that it would pass!" Christina seemed to gasp and smile at once. "You know, now, that it was not right;—that it was not you;—that it was an illness;—something that would pass?—You see it too, Milly?—And you will be happy with me again?"

"Yes, yes, dearest Christina."

Still smiling, Christina closed her eyes and Milly laid her back upon her pillows. Her fingers closed tightly on Milly's hand. "It has passed," she said. "It could not have been right. You were everything to me. And he could not have seen the pictures, the jewels, Milly; or heard the music."

"No, dear, no." Milly covered her own

eyes. Ah!—those cravings to which Christina had responded;—now so dead.

"I shall get better," said Christina. "I feel it now; I know it. I shall get better and be always with you. My darling. My Milly. My little Milly." Her voice had sunken to a shrouded whisper.

Held by those cold, clutching fingers, Milly sat sobbing. Christina would not get better; and, with horror at herself, she knew that only at the gates of death could she love Christina and be with her. And, glancing round at the head on the pillow—ah!—poor head!—Christina's wonderful head!—more wonderful than ever now, so eager, so doomed, so white, with all its flood of black, black hair—glancing at its ebony and marble, she saw that she need have no fear of life. Christina would not get better.

She spoke again, brokenly. "If you had loved him, you would have hated me. Now you will never hate me."

"I love you."

"You will not send for him? You will not see him alone? You will stay with me?"

"I will stay with you."

"And be glad with me again."

"With you again, dear Christina."

"I shall get better," Christina repeated, turning her head on Milly's arm. But the disarray of her mind still whispered on in vague fragments.—"It was not useless.—I was right. —I did not need to tell; you were mine; I had not lost you."

A few hours afterwards, her head still turned on Milly's arm, Christina died.

. . . . . .

Sitting alone on a winter day in the library of Chawlton, Milly heard the sound of a motor outside. Since Christina's death she had shut herself away, refusing to see anyone, and she listened now with apathetic interest, expecting to hear the retreating wheels. But the motor did not move away. Instead, after some delay at the door, steps crossed the hall, familiar, wonderful, dear and terrible. Dick had returned.

All the irony and humiliation of her married life rose before her as she felt herself trembling, flushing, with the joy and terror. He had come back; and so he had not guessed. Or was it that he had guessed and yet was too kind not to come? She had only time to snatch at conjecture, for Dick was before her.

Dick's demeanour was as unemphatic as she

remembered it always to have been. It was almost as casual as if he had returned from a day's hunting merely. Yet there was difference, too, though what it was her hurrying thoughts could not seize. She felt it as a radiance of pity, warm and almost vehement.

"My dear Milly," he said coming to her and taking her hand; "I only heard yesterday.—I only got back yesterday.—And I felt that I must see you. I'm not going to bother you in any way. I've only come down for the afternoon. But I wanted to ask you if I could do anything—help you in any way, be of any use." In spite of his schooled voice his longing to see her, his delight in seeing her, showed in his clouded, candid eyes. Milly felt it as the difference, the vague warmth and radiance.

"How kind of you, dear Dick," she said, and her poor voice groped vainly for firmness. "I am so glad to see you. It was good of you to come. Yes; it has been dreadful. You know; —Christina—our friendship"—But how confess to Dick her remorse or explain to Dick why she had left Christina? Her pride broke. With this human kindness near her, she could not maintain the decorum of their tangled relations as man and woman; the simple human relation alone became the most real one; the

loneliness and the grief of a child overwhelmed her. She sank, sobbing helplessly, into her chair.

"Oh—Milly!"—said poor Dick Quentyn. And the longing to comfort and console effacing his diffidence and the memory of her long unkindness towards himself, he knelt down beside her and took her into his arms.

Milly then said and did what she could never have believed herself capable of saying and doing. No pride could hold her from it, no dignity, not even common shame. She could not keep herself from dropping her face on his shoulder and sobbing;—"Oh—Dick—try—try to love me again. I am cold and selfish. I have behaved cruelly to everyone who loved me;—but I can't bear it any longer."

It was a startling moment for Dick Quentyn, the most startling of his life. "Try to love you?" he stammered. He pushed her back to look at her. "What do you mean, Milly?"

"What I say," Milly gasped.

"But what does it mean?" Dick repeated. "It isn't for you to ask me to love you. You know I love you. You know there's never been another woman in the world for me but you. It's you who have never loved me, Milly."

Her appeal had been like a diving under deep waters—she had not known when or where or how she would come up again. Now she opened her eyes and stared at her husband. She seemed, after that whirlpool moment of abysmal shame, to have come up from the further reaches of darkness, and it was under new, bewildering skies. Strange stars made her dizzy.

"Then why didn't you come and say good-bye to me—that day—in London this spring?" was all she found to say.

Dick was not stupid now. The lover's code was at last open between them, and he as well as she could read the significance of seemingly trivial words.

"Did you expect me?" he asked.

"Of course I expected you. I thought you saw how much," said Milly.

"I didn't think you expected me at all; why should I have thought it? But I did come. Didn't you know it?" said Dick.

"You did come?" In its extremity her astonishment was mild.

"That is to say—I never got there. Mrs. Drent met me. She told me how you'd gone to sleep, you know. She thought you'd gone to sleep, Milly. She didn't know you expected

me either, you see. It was in the park we talked, just there by the rhododendrons."

"She told you I had gone to sleep?—But why did that keep you from coming?" Milly had suddenly risen to her feet. She had grown pale.

"Why—it was obvious—you wouldn't want to be disturbed. She said that. And—everything else. She told me—for I confided in her then—she'd always been so kind to me; and I thought she might help me—but she told me how little you cared for me."

Milly had grasped his shoulder as she stood above him. "What did Christina tell you? What did she say about me? Let me understand."

"Why, Milly—what is it?—She told me—I didn't blame you, though it hurt, most unconscionably—because I'd always believed that, in spite of everything, you had some sort of kindly feeling for me—as though I'd been a well-intentioned dog who didn't mean to get in your way—she told me that I mustn't have any hopes. And she told me that that very winter you had said to her that you'd feel my death less than that of any of the men who came to tea with you. Yes, she told me so, Milly—and wasn't it true?"

Milly now looked away from him and round at the room, stupor on her face. "Yes, it was true I said it," she said in the voice of a sleep-walker. "Yes; I said it, Dick. But it was so long ago. How did she remember?—And I knew when I said it that it wasn't true."

"But she thought it was true." Dick now had risen, and he, too, very pale, looked at his wife.

"Yes; then, she may have thought it. I wanted her to think it because I did not want her to guess how much I was getting to care. But, afterwards—after you had come back—she did not think it then. She knew, then, everything. She knew before I did. It was she who showed it to me.—Oh, Dick!—She knew that I loved you—and she kept you from coming to me!" She was gazing at him now, stupefied, horrified, yet enraptured. It was of him she thought, her lover, her husband, rather than of the unhappy woman who had parted them. But Dick still did not see.

"What do you mean, Milly?" he said. "Kept me from coming? But she loved you, Milly? She'd given her life to you. You can't mean what you are saying."

"Yes," Milly kept her grasp of his shoulder. "It is true. She loved me, but it was a mad-

ness of jealousy. Her love was a prison. I told her so. We spoke of it all on that day, when she came back from seeing you and did not tell me that she had seen you. I told her that her love was a prison and that she had kept you from me, and that I was going to leave her. And even then she did not tell me. We parted and I did not see her again until the day she died. She sent for me to come to her. Yes—" her eyes, deep with joy and horror, were on him.—"That is what she was going to confess to me; and died without confessing. She kept us apart because she knew that we loved each other and she could not bear to give me up."

They stood in the firelight and he took her hands and they looked at each other as though, after long wanderings, they had found each other at last. There would yet be much to tell and to explain, but Dick saw now what had happened. Only after many moments of grave mutual survey, did he say, gently, with a sudden acute wonder and pity—"Poor thing."

"Horrible, oh horrible!" said Milly, leaning her head on his shoulder. "You might have died away from me—never knowing.—I might never have seen you again.—Horrible woman! —Horrible love."

"Poor thing," Dick repeated gently. He kissed his wife's forehead and, his arm around her;—"I haven't died.—She is dead. I do see you again.—She doesn't see you. I have got you.—She has lost you."

Milly still shuddered; she still looked down the black precipice, only just escaped. "Yes, she has lost me for ever. I wish I did not feel that I hate her; but I do. It may be cruel, it is cruel. But all that I can feel for her now is hatred."

"Ah—but she loved you tremendously. And she's dead," said Dick. "All that I can feel is that."

But Milly only said: "I love you all the more for feeling it."

MISS JONES AND THE MASTERPIECE

MISS JONES AND THE MASTERPIECE

CHAPTER I

"MANON LESCAUT," Carrington repeated. He did not show any particular enthusiasm.

"Yes, Manon Lescaut. I see the thing. It would be really superb."

"You don't mean to say, my dear boy, that you are falling into anecdote? You are not going to degrade your canvas with painted literature?"

Carrington's voice betrayed some concern, for he took a friendly interest in my career.

"The title—a mere label—suggests it. But nothing of the sort. I am going to paint a portrait of Manon—and of her ilk."

"A portrait?"

"Yes; the portrait of a type."

Carrington smoked on, stretched comfort-

ably in a chair. His feet were on another chair, and the broad soles of his slippers so displayed implied ease and intimacy.

"It will look like the portrait of an actress in character; a costume picture," he said, presently; "the label isn't suggestive to me."

"There will, I promise you, be no trace of commonplace realism in it. It will be Velasquez dashed with Watteau. Can you realize the modest flight of my imagination? Seriously, Carrington, I intend to paint a masterpiece. I intend to paint a woman who would sell her soul for pleasure—a conscienceless, fascinating egotist—a corrupt charmer—saved by a certain *naïveté*. The eighteenth century, in fact, *en grisette*."

"Manon rather redeemed herself at the end, if I remember rightly," Carrington observed.

"Or circumstances redeemed her, if you will. She had a heart, perhaps; it never made her uncomfortable. Her love was of the doubtful quality that flies out of the window as want comes in at the door. Oh! she was a sweet little *scélérate*. I shall paint the type—the little *scélérate*."

"Well, of course, everything would depend on the treatment."

"Everything. I am going to astonish you there, Carrington."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Carrington said, good-humouredly.

"I see already the golden gray of her dim white boudoir; the satins, the laces, the high-heeled shoes, the rigid little waist, and face of pretty depravity. The face is the thing—the key. Where find the face? I think of a trip to Paris on purpose. One sees the glancing creature—such as I have in my mind—there, now and then. I want a fresh pallor, and gay, lazy eyes—light-brown, not too large."

"I fancy I know of someone," Carrington said, meditatively. "Not that she's *dans le caractère,*" he added: "not at all; anything but depraved. But—her face; you could select." Carrington mused. "The line of her cheek is, I remember, mockingly at variance with her staid innocence of look."

"Who is she? Manon could *look* innocent, you know—was so, after a fashion. I should like a touch of childish *insouciance.* Who is she, and how can I get her?"

"Well," said Carrington, taking his pipe from his lips and contemplating the fine colouring of the bowl, "she's a lady, for one thing."

"Oh, the devil!" I ejaculated; "that won't do!"

"Well, it might."

"Shouldn't fancy it. Ill at ease on her account, you know. How could one tell a lady that she was out of pose—must sit still? How could one pay her?"

"Very simple, if she's the real article."

"I never tried it," I demurred.

"Well"—Carrington had a soothing way of beginning a sentence—"you might see her, at least. Her father is a socialist; a very harmless and unnecessary one, but that accounts for her posing."

"Do the paternal unconventionalities countenance posing for the *académie?* That savors of a really disconcerting latitude."

"The *académie?* Dear me, no! Oh, no; Miss Jones is a model of the proprieties. One indeed can hardly connect her with even such mild nonconformity as her father's socialism. He was a parson; had religious scruples, and took to rather aimless humanitarianism and to very excellent bookbinding in Hampstead. He binds a lot of my books for me; and jolly good designing and tooling, too. You remember that Petrarch of mine. That's really how I came to know him. It was the artist in him

that wrestled with and overthrew the parson. He seems a happy old chap; poor as Job's turkey and absorbed in his work. He has rather long-ish hair—wavy, and wears a leather belt and no collar." Carrington added: "That's the first socialistic declaration of independence—they fling their collars in the face of conventionality. But the belt and the lack of collar are the only noticeable traces socialism seems to have left on Mr. Jones, except that he lets his daughter make money by posing. He must know about the people, of course. She usually sits for women. But I can give you a recommendation."

I felt, to a certain extent, the same lack of enthusiasm that Carrington himself had shown at the announcement of my "label," but I thanked him, and said that I should be glad to see Miss Jones.

"And her mother was French, too," he added, as a cogent afterthought. "That accounts for the rippled cheek-line." Miss Jones's cheek had evidently made an emphatic impression. Indeed, Carrington's enthusiasm seemed to wax on reflection, and, as interpreted by Miss Jones, my Manon became tangible.

"How's her colouring?" I asked.

"Pale; her mouth is red, very red; charming

figure, nice hands; I remember them taking up the books—she was dusting the books. I've only seen her once or twice; but I noticed her, and she struck me as a type—of something."

The pale skin and red mouth rather pleased me, and it was arranged that Carrington should see Mr. Jones, and, if possible, make an appointment for Miss Jones to call on Monday afternoon at my studio.

Carrington had rooms next door, in the little court of artists' quarters in Chelsea.

Carrington wrote reviews and collected all sorts of expensive things, chiefly old books and Chinese porcelain. He and I had art-for-art sympathies, and, being lucky young men from a monetary point of view, we could indulge our propensities with a happy indifference to success.

I had painted now for a good many years, both in Paris and in London, and had a pleasant little reputation among people it was worth while to please, and a hearty and encouraging philistine opposition. I had even shocked Mrs. Grundy in an Academy picture which wasn't at all shocking and was very well painted, and I had aroused controversy in the pages of the *Saturday Review*.

I felt Manon Lescaut.

This epitome of the soullessness of the eighteenth century whirled in its satin frivolity through all my waking thoughts.

On Monday I awaited Miss Jones, fervently hoping that her face would do.

Punctual to the minute came the young lady's rap at my door. I ushered her in. She was rather small; and self-possessed, very. In the cut of her serge frock and the line of her little hat over her eyebrows I fancied I saw a touch of the mother's nationality. With a most business-like air she removed this hat, carefully replacing the pins in the holes they had already traversed, took off her coat (it was February), and turned to the light. She would do. Evident and delightful fact! I at once informed her of it. She asked if she should sit that morning. I said that, as I had sketches to make before deciding on pose and effect of light, the sooner she would enter upon her professional duties the better.

The gown I had already discovered—a *trouvaille* and genuinely of the epoch; an enticing pink silk with glowing shadows.

Miss Jones made no comment on the exquisite thing which I laid lovingly on her arm. She retired with a brisk, calm step behind the tall screen in the corner.

When she reappeared in the dress, the old whites of the muslins at elbows and breast falling and folding on a skin like milk, I felt my heart rise in a devout ejaculation of utter contentment. The Manon of my dreams stood before me. The expression certainly was wanting; I should have to compass it by analogy. My imagination had grasped it, and I should realize the type by the aid of Miss Jones's pale face, narrowing to a chin the French would call *mutin,* her curled lips and curiously set eyes, wide apart, and the brows that swept ever so slightly upward. The very way in which her fair hair grew in a little peak on the forehead, and curved silky and unrippled to a small knot placed high, fulfilled my aspirations, though the hair must be powdered and in it the vibrating black of a bow.

Miss Jones stood very well, conscientiously and with intelligence. Pose and effect were soon decided upon, and in a day or two I was regularly at work, delighting in it, and with a sensation of power and certainty I had rarely experienced.

Carrington came in quite frequently, and, looking from my canvas to Miss Jones, would pronounce the drawing wonderfully felt.

"Dégas wouldn't be ashamed of the line of

the neck," he said. "The turn and lift of her head as she looks sideways in the mirror is really *émouvant,* life; good idea; in character; centred on herself; not bent on conquest and staring it at you. Manon had not that trait."

Miss Jones on the stand gazed obediently into the mirror, the dim white of an eighteenth century boudoir about her. She was altogether a most *posée,* well-behaved young person.

One could not call her manner discreet; it was far too self-confident for that. Her silence was natural, not assumed. During the rests she would return to a book.

I asked her one day what she was reading. She replied, looking up with polite calm:

"'Donovan.'"

"Oh!" was all I could find in comment. It did rather surprise me in a girl whose eyes were set in that most appreciative way and whose father, as a socialistic bookbinder, might have inculcated more advanced literary tastes. Still, she was very young; this fact seemed emphasized by the innocent white the back of her neck presented to me as she returned to her reading.

When I came to painting, I found that my

good luck accompanied me, and that inspiring sense of mastery. Effort, yes; but achievement followed it with a sort of inevitableness. I tasted the joys of the arduous facility which is the fruition of years of toil.

The limpid grays seemed to me to equal Whistler's; the pinks—flaming in shadow, silvered in the light—suggested Velasquez to my happy young vanity; the warm whites, Chardin would have acknowledged; yet they were all my own, seen through my own eyes, not through the eyes of Chardin, Whistler, or Velasquez. The blacks sung emphatic or softened notes from the impertinent knot in the powdered hair to the bows on skirt and bodice. The rich *empâtement* was a triumph of supple brush-work. I can praise it impudently for it was my masterpiece, and—well, I will keep to the consecutive recital.

Miss Jones showed no particular fellow-feeling for my work, and as, after a fashion, she, too, was responsible for it and had a right to be proud of it, this lack of interest rather irritated me.

Now and then, poised delicately on high heels and in her rustling robes, she would step up to my canvas, give it a pleasant but impassive look, and then turn away, resum-

ing her chair and the perusal of her romance.

It really irked me after a time. However little value I might set upon her artistic acumen, this silence in my rose of pride pricked like a thorn.

Miss Jones's taste in painting might be as philistine as in literature, but her reserve aroused conjecture, and I became really anxious for an expression of opinion.

At last, one day, my curiosity burst forth:

"How do you like it?" I asked, while she stood contemplating my *chef-d'œuvre* with a brightly indifferent gaze. Miss Jones turned upon me her agate eyes—the eyelashes curled up at the corners, and it was difficult not to believe the eyes, too, roguish.

"I should think you had a great deal of talent," she said. "Have you studied long?"

Studied? It required some effort to adjust my thoughts to the standard implied; but perceiving a perhaps lofty conception of artistic attainment beneath the query, I replied:

"Well, an artist is never done learning, is he? And in the sense of having much to learn, I am still a student, no doubt."

"Ah, yes," Miss Jones replied.

She looked from my picture up at the skylight, then round at the various studies, en-

gravings, and photographs on the walls. This discursive glance was already familiar to me, and its flitting lightness whetted my curiosity as to possible non-committal depths beneath.

"Inspiration, now," Miss Jones pursued, surprising me a good deal, for she seldom carried on a subject unprompted, "that of course, is not dependent on study."

I felt in this remark something very derogatory to my Manon—an inspiration, and in the best sense, if ever anything was. Did Miss Jones not recognize the intellectual triumphs embodied in that presentment of frail womanhood? I was certainly piqued, though I replied very good-humouredly:

"I had rather flattered myself that my picture could boast of that quality."

Miss Jones's glance now rested on me rather seriously.

"An inspired work of art should elevate the mind."

I could not for the life of me tell whether she was really rather clever or merely very banal and commonplace.

"I had hoped," I rejoined, politely, "that my picture—as a beautiful work of art—would also possess that faculty."

Miss Jones now looked at the clock, and re-

marked that it was time to pose. She mounted the low stand and I resumed my palette and brushes, feeling decidedly snubbed. Carrington sauntered in shortly after, his forefinger in a book and a pipe between his teeth. He apologized to Miss Jones for the latter, and wished to know if she objected. Miss Jones's smile retained all its unabashed clearness as she replied:

"It *is* a rather nasty smell, I think."

Poor Carrington, decidedly disconcerted, knocked out his pipe and laid it down, and Miss Jones, observing him affably while she retained her pose to perfection, added: "I have been brought up to disapprove of smoking, you see; papa doesn't believe in tobacco."

Miss Jones's aplomb was certainly enough to make any man feel awkward, and Carrington looked so as he came up beside me and examined my work.

"By Jove! Fletcher," he said, "the resemblance is astonishing—*and* the lack of resemblance. That's the triumph—the material likeness, the spiritual unlikeness."

Indeed, Miss Jones could lay no claim to the "inspiration" of my work; in intrinsic character the face of my pretty *scélérate* was in no way Miss Jones's.

"Charming, charming," and Carrington's eye, passing from my canvas, rested on Miss Jones.

"Which?" I asked, smiling, and, of course, in an undertone.

"It depends, my dear boy, on whether you ask me if I prefer Phryne or Priscilla—pagan or puritan; both are interesting types, and the contrast can be very effectually studied here in your picture and your model."

"Yet Priscilla lends herself wonderfully to be interpreted as Phryne."

"Or, rather, it is wonderful that you should have imagined Manon into that face."

In the next rest, when Carrington had gone, Miss Jones said:

"Mr. Carrington walked home with me yesterday. Papa thinks rather highly of him. It is a pity his life should be so pointless."

It began to be borne in upon me that Miss Jones had painfully serious ethical convictions.

"I suppose you mean from the socialistic standpoint," I said.

"Oh, no—not at all; I am not a socialist. Papa and I agree to differ upon that as upon many other questions. Socialism, I think, tends to revolt and license."

I did not pursue the subject of Carrington's

pointlessness nor proffer a plea for socialism. I was beginning to wince rather before Miss Jones's frankness.

On the following day she again came and stood before my picture.

"I posed for Mr. Watkins, R.A., last year," she said. "The picture was in the Academy. Did you see it? It was beautiful."

The mere name of Mr. Watkins ("R.A.") made every drop of æsthetic blood in my body curdle. A conscienceless old prater of the soap and salve school, with not as much idea of drawing or value as a two-year Julianite.

"I don't quite remember," I said, rather faintly; "what was—the picture called?"

" 'Faith Conquers Fear,' " said Miss Jones. "I posed as a Christian maiden, you know, tied to a stake in the Roman amphitheatre and waiting martyrdom. The maiden was in a white robe, her hair hanging over her shoulders (perhaps you would not recognize me in this costume), looking up, her hands crossed on her breast. Before her stood a jibing Roman. One could see it all; the contrast between the base product of a vicious civilization and the noble maiden. One could read it all in their faces; hers supreme aspiration, his brutal ha-

tred. It was superb. It made one want to cry."

Miss Jones, while speaking, looked so exceedingly beautiful that I almost forgot my dismay at her atrocious taste; for Watkins's "Faith Conquers Fear" had been one of the jokes of the year—a lamentably crude, pretentious presentation of a theatrical subject reproduced extensively in ladies' papers and fatally popular.

At the same moment, and as I looked from Miss Jones's gravely enrapt expression to Manon's seductive graces, I experienced a sensation of extreme discomfort.

"I think a picture should have high and noble aims," Miss Jones pursued, seeing that I remained silent, and evidently considering the time come when duty required her to speak and to speak freely. "A picture should leave one better for having seen it."

I could not ignore the kind but firmly severe criticism implied; I could not but revolt from this Hebraistic onslaught.

"I don't admit a conscious moral aim in art," I said. "Art need only concern itself with being beautiful and interesting; the rest will follow. But a badly-painted picture certainly makes me feel wicked, and when I go to the

National Gallery to have a look at the Velasquezes and Veroneses I feel the better for it."

"Velasquez?" Miss Jones repeated. "Ah, well, I prefer the old masters—I mean those who painted religious subjects as no one since has painted them. Why did not Velasquez, at least, as he could not rise to the ideal, paint beautiful people? I never have been able to care for mere ugliness, however cleverly copied."

I felt buffeted by her complacent crudity.

"Velasquez had no soul," she added.

"No soul! Why he paints life, character, soul, everything! Copied! What of his splendid decorativeness, his colour, his atmosphere?" My ejaculations left her calm unruffled.

"Ah, but all that doesn't make the world any better," she returned, really with an air of humouring a silly materialism; and as she went back to her pose she added, very kindly, for my face probably revealed my injured feelings:

"You see I have rather serious views of life."

"Miss Jones—really!" I laid down my palette. "I must beg of you to believe that I have, too—very serious."

Gently Miss Jones shook her head, looking, not at me, but down into the mirror. This ef-

fect of duty fulfilled, even in opposition, was most characteristic.

"I cannot believe it," she said, "else why, when you have facility, talent, and might employ them on a higher subject, do you paint a mere study of a vain young lady?"

This interpretation of Manon startled me, so lacking was it in comprehension.

"Manon Lescaut was more than a vain young lady, Miss Jones."

"Well," Miss Jones lifted her eyes for a moment to smile quietly, soothingly at me. "I am not imputing any wrong to Miss Manon Lescaut; I merely say that she is vain. A harmless vanity no doubt, but I have posed for other characters, you see!" Her smile was so charming in its very fatuity that the vision of her lovely face, vulgarized and unrecognizable in "Faith Conquers Fear," filled me with redoubled exasperation. Her misinterpretation of Manon stirred a certain deepening of that touch of discomfort—a sickly unpleasantness. I found myself flushing.

Miss Jones's white hand—the hand that held the mirror with such beauty in taper fingertips and turn of wrist—fell to her side, and she fixed her eyes on me with quite a troubled look.

"I am afraid I have hurt your feelings," she

said; "I am very sorry. I always speak my mind out; I never think that it may hurt. It is very dull in me."

At these words I felt that unpleasant stir spring suddenly to a guilty misery. I felt, somehow, that I was a shameful hypocrite, and Miss Jones a priggish but most charming and most injured angel.

"Miss Jones," I said, much confused, "sincerity cannot really hurt me, and I always respect it. I am sorry, very sorry, that you see no more in my picture. I care for your good opinion" (this was certainly, in a sense, a lie, and yet, for the moment, that guilty consciousness upon me, I believed it), "and I hope that though my picture has not gained it, I, personally, may never forfeit it."

Still looking at me gravely, Miss Jones said:

"I don't think you ever will. That is a very manly, a very noble way of looking at it."

But the thought of Manon Lescaut now tormented me. I had finished the head; my preoccupation could not harm that; but this lovely face looking into the mirror, with soulless, happy eyes, seemed to slide a smile at me, a smile of malicious comprehension, a smile of *nous nous entendons,* a smile that made a butt

of Miss Jones's innocence and laughed with me at the joke.

I soon found myself rebelling against Manon's intrusion. I wished to assure her that we had nothing in common and that, in Miss Jones's innocence, I found no amusing element.

That evening Carrington came in. He wore a rather absorbed look, and only glanced at my picture. After absent replies to my desultory remarks, he suddenly said, from his chair:

"I walked home with Miss Jones this afternoon." Carrington, with his ultra-æsthetic sensibilities, must find Miss Jones even more jarring than I did, and his act implied a very kindly interest.

"That was nice of you," I observed, though at the mention of Miss Jones that piercing stab of shame again went through me, and my eyes unwillingly, guiltily sought the eyes of my smiling Manon.

"She was rather troubled about something she had said," Carrington pursued, ignoring my approbation, "about the picture. Of course she doesn't know anything about pictures."

"No," I murmured, "she doesn't."

"By Jove!" added Carrington, "that's the trouble. She doesn't understand anything!"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, I mean that she could never see certain things from our standpoint; she is as ignorant and as innocent as a baby. She's never read 'Manon Lescaut'—that came out *en passant*—and, by Jove, you know, it *does* seem a beastly shame! A girl like that! A snowdrop!"

Carrington cast a look of unmistakable resentment at my poor Manon.

"Well," I said, lamely—indeed I felt maimed —"how was I to know? And what am I to do?"

"Why, my dear fellow," and Carrington spoke with some fierceness, "you've nothing to do with it! *I'm* to blame! I told you about her. Said she had the type! Dull, blundering fool that I was not to have seen the shrieking incongruity! The rigidly upright soul of her! That girl couldn't tell a lie nor look one; and *Manon!*"

Carrington got up abruptly; evidently his disgust could not be borne in a quiescent attitude.

"You said at the first that her face was innocent," I suggested, in a feeble effort to mitigate this self-scorn; "we neither of us misjudged the girl for a moment, though we overlooked her ignorance."

"Yes, and her ignorance makes all the difference. Another girl—as good, to all intents and purposes—might know and not object; but this one! I really believe it would half kill her!"

Carrington gave another savage glance at my unlucky picture, and his gaze lingered on it as he added:

"If it's kept from her, all's well—as well as a lie can be."

And then, if only for a moment, the Greek gained its triumph over this startling exhibition of Hebraism.

"It is a masterpiece!" said Carrington, slowly, adding abruptly as he went, "Good-night!"

But my night was very bad. Whatever Miss Jones might say or think, I *did* take life seriously.

CHAPTER II

A FEW days followed in which Miss Jones showed herself to me in a sweet and softened mood, the mood that wishes to make amends for salutary harshness. My meekness under reproof had evidently won her approbation. In the rests she talked to me. She gave me her opinions upon many subjects, and very admirable they were and very commonplace. One thing about Miss Jones, however, was not commonplace. She would certainly act up to her opinions. Her sense of duty was enormous; but she bore it pleasantly, albeit seriously. She had a keen *flair* for responsibilities. I began to suspect that she had assumed my moral well-being as one of them.

Her priggishness was so unconscious—so sincere, if one may say so—that it staggered me. Her calmly complacent truisms confounded any subtleties by marching over them —utterly ignoring them. One could not argue with her, for she was so sublimely sure of

herself that she made one doubt the divine right of good taste, and wonder if flat-footed stupidity were not right after all.

And, above all, however questionable her mental attributes might be, her moral worth was certainly awe-inspiring. The clear, metallic flawlessness of her conscience seemed to glare in one's eyes, and poor every-day manhood shrunk into itself, painfully aware of spots and fissures.

"Yes," Miss Jones said, leaning back in her incongruous robes; "yes, the longer I live the more I feel that, as Longfellow says:

Life is real, life is *earnest.*"

She emphasized the quotation with solemnity: "We can't trifle with our lives; we can't play through them. We must *live* them. We must make something of them."

"Each man after his own nature," I suggested, feebly, for I felt sure that "we can't *paint* through them" was implied, and wished to turn from that issue, with which I felt myself incapable of grappling.

But Miss Jones was not to be balked of her moral.

"We build our own characters," she said, and her look held kind warning. "We must

not act after our own nature if that nature is base or trivial."

"I know," I murmured.

"It is only by holding firmly to an ideal that we rise, step by step, beyond our lower selves."

Beyond "Manon Lescaut" to "Faith Conquers Fear" this might mean.

"And ideals we must have," she pursued. Then rising, her little air of guide and counsellor touched with a smile: "But I must not preach too much, must I?"

It was comforting to dwell on the ludicrous aspects of this mentorship, for, when my thoughts led me to a contemplation of Miss Jones's ideals, I felt my position to be meanly hypocritical, if not "base." Manon was almost finished. Ah! it was superb!—but even my joy in Manon rankled and had lost its savour. Manon was there under false pretences, her presence a subtle insult to Miss Jones. Miss Jones in her flaming gown took on symbolical meanings. An unconscious martyr wearing, did she but know it, the veritable robe of Nessus! A sense of protectorship, tender in its self-reproach, grew upon me—a longing for atonement. I had sacrificed Miss Jones to my masterpiece, and its beauty was baleful, vampire-like.

It was indeed a small thing to take Miss Jones's homilies humbly. Indeed, for this humility I could claim no element of expiation, for I really liked to hear her; she looked so pretty when she talked. It was all so touching and so amusing.

I am not sure that she had read Dante, but if she had she no doubt saw herself something in the guise of a Beatrice stooping from heights of wisdom to support my straying, faltering footsteps. She brought me one day a feeble little volume of third-rate verse, with a page turned down at a passage she requested me to read. The badly constructed lines, their grandiloquent sentimentality, jarred on me; but in them I perceived a complimentary application that might imply much encouragement. Miss Jones evidently thought that I was rising step by step, and put this cordial to my lips. I thanked her very earnestly—feeling positively shrivelled—and then, turning from the subject with a haste I hoped she might impute to modesty—and indeed modesty of a certain humiliating kind did form part of it—I told her that Manon would only require another sitting after that day.

"Ah! is it finished, then?"

She went to look at it.

"*Is* my left eye as indistinct as that?" she asked, playfully. "Can't you see my eyelashes? That is impressionism, I suppose." I felt my forehead growing hot.

"The left eye is in shadow," I observed.

"I am afraid shadows are convenient sometimes, aren't they? I like just a plain, straightforward telling of the truth, with no green paint over it! You accept a little well-meant teasing, don't you?"

I accepted it as I had to accept her various revelations of stupefying obtuseness, and smiled over the sandy mouthful.

"Yes," she pursued, carefully looking up and down the canvas—certainly a new sign of interest in me and my work—"you will need quite two days to finish it; the hands especially, they are rather sketchy about the finger-tips." She might have been a genial old professor giving me advice mingled with the good-humored *raillerie* of superiority. The hands were finished; but I kept a cowardly silence.

"And the dress must be a good bit more distinctly outlined; I can't see *where* it goes on this side; and then the details of the background—I can hardly tell what those dashes and splashes on the dressing-table are supposed to represent."

"I think you are standing a little too near the canvas," I said, in a voice which I strove to free from a tone of patient long-suffering. "If you go farther away, you will get the effect of the *ensemble*."

"No, no!" she laughed; she evidently thought that her ethical relationship justified an equally frank æsthetic helpfulness, and her air of competence was bewildering. "No, we must not run away from the truth! A smudge is a smudge from whatever standpoint one looks at it, and a smear a smear."

The masterly treatment of porcelains, ivories, and silver on the dressing-table, glimmering and gleaming from the soft shadows, to be qualified in such terms!

"You are rather severe," I said. My discomfort was apparent, but she naturally took it to be on my own behalf, not, as it was, on hers.

"Oh! you mustn't think *that!* I hope I am never unduly severe. You will easily mend matters to-day and to-morrow and polish over that rather careless look. And, as far as that goes, I am at your service as long as you need me."

"As model *and* critic," I observed, with a touch of bitterness.

"As model *and* critic," she repeated, brightly.

"Do you know," she added, mounting the stand, "I found 'Manon Lescaut' on a bookshelf this morning. I didn't know that it was a French book. I am going to read it this evening."

I was struck dumb. This possibility had never presented itself to me.

"I shall find the scene you have painted," she continued, looking down at her gown and patting a fold into place; "I shall see whether you have illustrated it conscientiously."

"The book wouldn't interest you at all! Not at all!" I burst out, conscious of a feverish intensity in the gaze I bent upon her. "It is—it is decidedly *dull!*"

"Is it?" said Miss Jones, indifferently. "Now I can't quite believe that. You evidently didn't think it too dull to illustrate. There must be some nice bits in it, and I mean to find the bit where the heroine, in a pink silk gown, looks at herself in a mirror."

"Well, you'll find no such bit. I haven't illustrated it!" I strove to keep my voice fairly cool. "I merely took the heroine's name as indicative of a class, and chose the epoch as characteristic. The book is dull, old-fashioned."

"Ah, but I might not agree with you there. Is it an historical novel? I like them, even if

they are rather slow. One gets all sorts of ideas about people of another age."

"It isn't historical." Despite my efforts my voice was growing sharply anxious, and Miss Jones was beginning to notice my anxiety. "And the characters in it are not people you would care to have ideas about. It is merely one of the first attempts to write a psychological study, in the form of romance, made in France."

"Oh, but that is exceedingly interesting."

"You would only find the rather crude analysis of a—a disagreeable girl."

"You think *I* am like a disagreeable girl, then!" said Miss Jones, still laughing. "From the first I have had a bit of a grudge against you for finding me so suitable. I am sure I am not vain."

"Manon was more than vain. She was heartless, a liar." I felt myself stumbling from bad to worse. "Not in the least like you in anything, except that she was beautiful." My explanation, with this bald piece of tasteless flattery, had hardly helped matters. Indeed, Miss Jones became rather coldly silent. I painted on, my mind in a disturbing whirl of conjecture. I felt convinced that I had merely whetted her curiosity and that she would go

straight home to the perusal of "Manon"; and to expect from her the faintest literary appreciation of the distinction and the delicacy of the book was hopeless. She would fasten with horror on the brazen immorality of a character she had been chosen to embody. The blood surged up to my head as I painted.

As Miss Jones was preparing to go, I held out my hand.

"Good-bye," I said, feeling very badly.

"Good-bye? Am I not coming to-morrow?" She had paused in the act of neatly folding her umbrella, which had been thoughtfully left open to dry while she posed. It had now stopped raining.

"Yes—yes, of course," I stammered.

She secured the elastic band, and then looked at me.

"Miss Jones," I blurted out, abruptly, "don't read 'Manon Lescaut'; please don't."

Her glance became severely penetrating:

"I really don't understand you," she said, and then added: "I most certainly shall read it."

"Well, if you do"—my urgent tone delayed her going—"try to judge it from an artistic standpoint, you know. A study—a type. Don't apply—ah—*modern* standards."

"I shall apply *my* standards. I know no other method of judging a book."

"Well, then,"—my manner was becoming pitiful—"remember that the physical resemblance between you was merely in my imagination."

"I have always believed the face indicative of the character, and I'm sorry that mine should have suggested to you the character of a liar," said Miss Jones. It was evident that already she was hurt and, disregarding my reiterated "It did not! It did not! upon my honour," she opened the door to go. I still detained her.

"Miss Jones," I said, standing before her, "I know that you are going to misjudge me, and that, because you see certain things from an ethical and I from a purely æsthetic point of view."

"I can't admit the division. But no; I hope I shall never *misjudge* you." She gave me a brief little smile and walked quickly away.

Carrington did not come in that evening, and I was glad that my mental anguish had no observer.

The next afternoon at two I awaited Miss Jones. My picture, virtually finished, stood regally dominant in the centre of the studio.

I hated and I adored it. I saw it with Miss

Jones's eyes and I saw it with my own; but her crude ethics had, on the whole, poisoned my æsthetic triumph.

At two there came the familiar rap. Miss Jones entered. I was sitting before the picture and rose to meet her. Her face was very white and very cold, and from under the tipped brim of the little hat her eyes looked sternly at me. I looked back at her silently.

"I have read 'Manon Lescaut,'" said Miss Jones. I found nothing to say.

"You will understand that I cannot sit to-day. You will understand that I never should have sat for you at all had I *known,*" Miss Jones pursued.

I said that I understood.

"I have come to-day to bring you back the money that I have earned under false pretences."

She laid the little packet down upon the table. I turned white. "And to ask you"—here Miss Jones observed me steadily—"whether you do not feel that you owe me apologies."

"Miss Jones," I said, "I have unwittingly, unintentionally, given you great pain; that, with my present knowledge of your exceptional character, I now see to have been inevitable. I humbly beg your pardon for it, but I also beg

you to believe that from the first I never thought of you but with respect and admiration."

Miss Jones's face took on quite a terrible look.

"Respect! Admiration! While you were looking from me to *that!*" She pointed to Manon. "While I was clothing your imagination, personifying to you that vile creature!"

I tried to stop her with an exclamation of shocked denial, but she went on, with fierce dignity:

"Exceptional! You call it exceptional to feel debased by that association? Can I ever look at my face again without thinking: 'The face of Manon Lescaut?' Can I ever forget that we were thought of as one? No"—she held up her hand—"let me speak. Do you suppose I cannot see now the cleverness, yes, the diabolical cleverness, of your picture of me there? The likeness is horrible; and there I shall stand for the world to gaze at as long as the canvas lasts and as long as people look at any pictures. There *I* shall be, gibbeted in that woman's smile! No, I have not done! There will be no escape possible. Somewhere —I shall always feel it like a hot iron searing me—somewhere that other I will be all my life long, and when I am dead, and for centuries

perhaps, she will smile on, and my image will be looked at as a type of vice! I see it now," and with a sort of grandeur of revelation she turned upon Manon, "I see that it is a masterpiece!"

I placed myself between her and it.

"Miss Jones," I said, "this is rather a supreme moment for me, more supreme than you will ever understand. I forgot you for my picture; I will not forget my picture for you." The icy fire of her eyes followed me while I went to the table and took up a sharp, long dagger which lay beside the little packet of money. I returned to the picture and, giving it one long look, I ripped the canvas from top to bottom. Miss Jones made neither sound nor sign. With dogged despair I pierced the smiling face, I hacked and rent the exquisite thing. The rose-coloured tatters fell forward; in five minutes "Manon Lescaut" was dead, utterly annihilated, and Miss Jones surveyed the place where she had been. I turned to her, and I have no doubt that my face expressed my exultant misery.

"And now!" I exclaimed.

"Now," said Miss Jones, looking solemnly at me, "you have done right, you have done *nobly,* and you will be the happier for it."

"Shall I?" I said, approaching her. "Shall I?"

"Yes. I can confidently say it. That bad thing would have poisoned your life as it would have poisoned mine." I ignored the misstatement.

"Miss Jones," I said, "for your sake I have destroyed the best thing in my life; may I hope for a better? I love you."

Her pale and beautiful face looked very little less calm, but certainly a little dismayed, certainly a little sorry.

"The best thing has been this act of sacrifice," she said; "don't spoil that by any weak regret. You have gained my admiration and my respect; but for better things, if better there are, I accepted Mr. Carrington last night."

. . . . . .

Perhaps I don't regret. Though she was a prig, I had loved her in the half hour's exaltation. I am certainly not sorry that she married Carrington. They seem to be very happy. But the chivalrous moment was worth while—perhaps. However that may be, since then I have never painted anything as good as Manon Lescaut.

THE END

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY
3 9999 10046 971 5